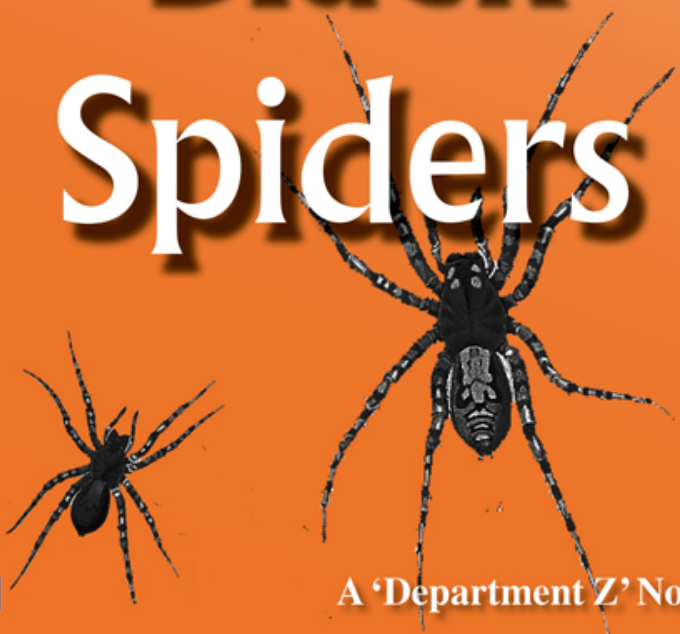
JOHN CREASEY

The Black Spiders



A 'Department Z' Novel

Copyright & Information

The Black Spiders

First published in 1957
Copyright: John Creasey Literary Management Ltd.; House of Stratus 1957-2012

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form, or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise), without the prior permission of the publisher. Any person who does any unauthorised act in relation to this publication may be liable to criminal prosecution and civil claims for damages.

The right of John Creaseyto be identified as the author of this work has been asserted.

This edition published in 2012 by House of Stratus, an imprint of Stratus Books Ltd., Lisandra House, Fore Street, Looe, Cornwall, PL13 1AD, UK.

Typeset by House of Stratus.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library and the Library of Congress.

EAN	ISBN	Edition
075512393X	9780755123933	Print
0755131614	9780755131617	Mobi
0755131622	9780755131624	Epub

This is a fictional work and all characters are drawn from the author's imagination. Any resemblance or similarities to persons either living or dead are entirely coincidental.

www.houseofstratus.com

About the Author

John Creasey – Master Storyteller - was born in Surrey, England in 1908 into a poor family in which there were nine children, John Creasey grew up to be a true master story teller and international sensation. His more than 600 crime, mystery and thriller titles have now sold 80 million copies in 25 languages. These include many popular series such as *Gideon of Scotland Yard, The Toff, Dr Palfrey and The Baron*.

Creasy wrote under many pseudonyms, explaining that booksellers had complained he totally dominated the 'C' section in stores. They included:

> *Gordon Ashe, M E Cooke, Norman Deane, Robert Caine Frazer, Patrick Gill, Michael Halliday, Charles Hogarth, Brian Hope, Colin Hughes, Kyle Hunt, Abel Mann, Peter Manton, J J Marric, Richard Martin, Rodney Mattheson, Anthony Morton and Jeremy York.*

Never one to sit still, Creasey had a strong social conscience, and stood for Parliament several times, along with founding the *One Party Alliance* which promoted the idea of government by a coalition of the best minds from across the political spectrum.

He also founded the *British Crime Writers' Association*, which to this day celebrates outstanding crime writing. *The Mystery Writers of America* bestowed upon him the *Edgar Award* for best novel and then in 1969 the ultimate *Grand Master Award*. John Creasey's stories are as compelling today as ever.

1. Night

Murray woke, with a start.

There had been a sound, and he was aware of it, but he heard nothing now except the rustle of the wind in the trees.

He lay on his back, his eyes wide open, sleep forgotten, and feeling a kind of uneasiness; that all was not well. Yet there was just the one sound, as a lullaby, and there were the outlines of the trees against the starlit sky; peace and quiet and —

Crack!

It came sharp and clear and unmistakable; a pistol-shot. It came from just outside, too, from underneath his window. Now his heart hammered. He flung back the bedclothes and stretched out a hand for the bedside lamp, then snatched his hand away, remembering that light could bring danger. Now that he was on his feet and stepping towards the grey outline of the window, it was almost possible to believe that he had imagined that sharp crack of a shot. Yet it echoed in his ears, and he strained to hear another shot, half fearful that it would come.

He reached the sash-cord window, which was open at the top, not at the bottom, and then heard a different sound; as of a man, muttering. Beyond the tree was the garden, beyond the garden the field, and beyond the field the cliff and the sea, a hundred yards away. He was alone in this cottage, and no one else lived within a mile of the spot.

He pressed close to the window, trying to see into the murky greyness, and he could make out the shape of bushes and of smaller trees, a hedge, even the old well with its wooden roof; but there was no sign of a man; or of men. He stood quite still, his heart-beats steadying, telling himself that it was absurd to think of danger for him, that he might even have imagined—

A white light shone out.

Its beam was narrow close to the bright round orb, and gradually broadened, losing its whiteness in a kind of mist. It was uncanny to stand there and watch it move round, the beam lighting up those things which had been almost black, and turning them to silver. He saw the heads of flowers, the rose-bushes, the well. The light hovered about the well, moved on, and then darted back again, as if the man who held it thought that it might hide whatever he was seeking. Now it was held steady over the well, and the man holding the torch—just a dark shape behind the whiteness of the light—began to move forward. He walked steadily, and although the beam wavered a little, it did not once shift from the well.

Then, another beam shot out, this time from almost directly beneath Murray—a torch held by someone underneath the bedroom window. This light also aimed towards the well, and the two beams met by the well itself, throwing the old bucket near it into sharp relief, the wheel, the roof and the two stays, and—the hands.

Until that moment, Murray had only vaguely understood what was going on, and he had taken it for granted that the cottage was to be burgled. Now he believed that he knew differently, for he could see two hands clutching the wall of the well. Someone must be hanging at arms' length. There was no ledge inside the well, he knew, but at one side—not far from those clinging hands—there were iron rungs, forming a kind of ladder leading down into the water. That water was never less

than thirty feet deep.

Now the two men carrying the torches advanced towards each other, as if they were stalking prey. There was no sound except the rustling, while the beams carved light out of the darkness.

And the light showed the guns, one in each man's hand.

One man, facing the cottage, became clearly visible; short, slim, clad in black or dark grey, wearing a trilby hat which was pushed to the back of his head. The light made his eyes shine, and showed up his aquiline features and pointed chin. The other was more silhouette, and Murray could not see much of him.

They were about equidistant from the well, no more than ten yards away from either side; and the hands were still there, becoming more vivid as the light drew nearer and consequently brighter.

All of this revealed itself to Murray in a fleeting moment; and during it each man took three or four slow steps. Then suddenly one of the clinging hands shifted, the fingers waved, the whole hand showed for a moment, as if it were beckoning and whoever was there was making some kind of despairing plea. Then it vanished beneath the edge of the well.

Murray flinched.

Anyone clinging on with one hand could only last for a minute or two, at most.

There were the two armed men, an unknown victim, and the dark night—and Murray had no gun here, nothing he could easily use as a weapon. Yet he had to distract the attention of those men, and he had to get down to the well, and help the unseen victim.

How?

He had no weapon, remember.

He was hardly aware of conscious thought as he moved to the bedside table and the bedside lamp, twisted the lamp-bulb out of its socket, and went back to the window. By standing on tip-toe he could toss the bulb out through the gap at the top of the window, making no sound. He threw it as far as he could, then ducked back inside the room and went for the bulb in the ceiling light. As he groped, he kicked against his shoes, actually a pair of open sandals. He tried to get the bulb out and slip his feet into the sandals at the same time, waiting every moment for the first bulb to explode—but it did not.

It must have caught in the branches of the tree.

He got the other bulb out, and his feet were in the sandals. He scuffled along, almost desperately. Now the two men were within two yards of the well.

He had expected them to be nearer, but they were as cautious as ever, as if they feared that danger waited in the darkness for them, too.

He looked anxiously towards the well.

Both hands were in sight, and—-

A sharp, cracking shot broke the night's quiet. The torches went out, a man gasped, and then there came silence in the blackness. It was impossible to tell whether either of the men was moving, whether either had been hurt.

But now Murray had a little precious time, and cause for hope; help of a kind was near, and fear of further shooting would probably keep those men in the darkness, while he made for the well.

He pushed the bottom part of the window up. It didn't squeak, and so did not attract the attention of anyone down below. He kept the bulb in his pocket, for it might be invaluable soon—the explosion as it burst would startle the two men, and

give him some advantage.

Who had fired at them?

A light glowed for a moment, just long enough for Murray to make out a man crouching behind a garden seat not far from the well. Next moment, a shot cracked, and Murray saw a flash at a comer of the cottage.

The torch light went out.

Murray climbed backwards out of the window, then lowered himself at arms' length. His feet dangled close to the ground-floor window; it wasn't really a long drop, but the concrete path beneath could do a lot of harm.

He dropped, bending his knees, and touched the concrete. He jarred his left ankle painfully, and almost fell, but he swayed into the wall, and steadied himself.

All he could see now were the stars in the blackness, and the outline of bushes and trees. He heard no movement at all, and could imagine the two men staring towards the corner from where the shot had come, fearful of another.

His ankle hurt slightly, but not enough to stop him from moving freely. Almost at hand was the back porch, and close to this a little lean-to, where forks and rakes, spades and other gardening tools were kept. A garden fork could be a useful weapon.

Abruptly, shooting came again, four or five shots in quick succession. There were flashes from three different points, including the corner. Murray heard a sound, as of a man falling. Almost at once, two torches shone out again—and their beams converged on the corner and shone upon a man who lay crumpled on the ground.

Dead?

One of the men carrying a torch hurried towards the corner, and the man lying there made no move.

Murray turned towards the well.

A beam of light shot out towards him, but it struck the window beneath his bedroom; he was outside its range. He bent low, and made for the hedges which separated the vegetable from the flower garden; it offered some cover.

He could not be absolutely sure, but believed that the two men knew he was in the garden, perhaps had heard what little sound he had made.

If they shone a light upon him—

A single shot cracked; he saw the flash, and heard a bullet hit the wall of the house. Bad shooting, but it didn't help his nerves. These two men were shooting to kill—and someone was in the well.

Still holding on?

He took the light-bulb out of his pocket and hurled it towards a far corner, then stood unmoving. He heard it make a funny slither of sound, and then the explosion came, far louder than a shot.

He found himself clenching his teeth slightly as he crept along by the hedge. The light of a torch was shining towards the spot where the bulb had burst. If he had had a gun he could have picked the man off.

The beam of light swivelled round, slowly, but the other man didn't switch on his. Why? At least neither of them was paying much attention to the victim in the well.

Murray straightened up, momentarily safe from the light, but it soon came creeping towards him.

Somewhere near here was an apple-tree, old and gnarled, and if he could get behind it, he would be safe from the light. How near was it? He stretched up his left

arm and felt the branches and twigs, a few drying leaves, then an apple. He didn't think about that until he reached the trunk of the tree and sidled round it. The light moved faster, and it shone upon a privet hedge, where a bush was cut in the shape of a man. As the light fell upon it, the man standing in darkness, nearer the well, fired. So one was picking out the target, the other waiting to shoot. They didn't waste another bullet; probably they realised what they had done.

Murray leaned against the tree. The one beam of light sent a pale glow beyond its sharp edge, and now he could make out the crouching figure of the man who had fired— and he was no more than five yards away. Given a gun, given anything that he could throw, Murray could deal with one man and stand a chance with the second.

The light was coming nearer; in a few seconds it would shine on him, and the hedge no longer gave shelter.

Any missile would do, any—

Apples!

He stretched up, eagerly. The tree was laden, he had looked at it only that evening. He groped about and felt several apples; two of them fell almost at a touch. He caught them. The glow of light was very near now; but for the trunk of the tree, he would be seen. And the light showed up the man who stood in darkness, waiting to shoot.

At five or six yards he couldn't miss.

Murray hurled the apples, one after the other. There was a rustling sound as they went, which must have puzzled both men. Then he heard an apple strike home, heard a cry, heard the second strike with the same crunchy sound as the first. The man was obviously off his balance, and he showed up as the torch beam moved up and down. His arms were waving, and he was dangerously close to the edge of the well. He wouldn't fall down it, but if he struck the edge he would probably lose his balance.

Murray leapt towards him.

The other man couldn't be many yards away, and now Murray was in the full light of the torch. If shooting began afresh, he wouldn't have a chance. He was aware of that, but didn't realise its full significance. The gap between him and the man by the well vanished before the man recovered his balance. Murray crashed into him, and grabbed at his right wrist. If he could get that gun, there would be a chance of driving both men away. If he failed, he probably wouldn't live to know what it was all about.

Body pressed against body in the desperate struggle, and the light was upon them as the other man came running up. Murray's fingers tightened about a thin, wiry wrist, and he twisted savagely. He heard the other gasp, knew he was much shorter, felt him trying to bring a knee up into the pit of his stomach.

Then the other's hold on the gun relaxed.

Murray snatched the gun, brought it down smack on the back of the man's head, and pushed his victim away. Then he swivelled round on his left foot. The pain at the ankle almost made him cry out, but his foot didn't give way.

The light was only two yards away, shining in his eyes. He saw the second man's gun. It flashed. He fired in turn, felt a pluck at his shoulder, fired again, and heard a gasp; then he saw the light swinging wildly, as if the man holding it was drunk. But although the light described circles in the darkness, like a giant firework, the man still came on.

He lunged forward, and Murray tensed himself for another struggle—and then realised the truth.

This man had no fight at all left in him, he leaned limply against Murray, and after the first relief, Murray felt something wet and warm drip on to his hand.

So this man was wounded, and offered no threat.

The other was still on the ground, but probably wouldn't be unconscious for long; there was no time to spare if Murray was to help whoever was hanging down the well.

Or had the victim fallen, and been drowned?

2. Body in the Well

Although the man leaning against Murray seemed very small, he was dead weight. Murray pushed him off, gasping for breath, and he showed no sign of life—just slid to one side and fell, heavily.

The other man didn't move.

There was no light, no way of seeing if those clinging hands were still there.

Murray bent down and groped about; a torch couldn't be far away, and it might still work. He touched the body of the man whom he had knocked unconscious, then patted his coat—and felt something inside one of the pockets.

He slid his hand inside.

This was a torch.

Murray pressed the switch on even before he drew it out, and bright light shone into his own eyes, dazzling him. Fool. He swung the beam towards the well, and the centuries-old brick wall which surrounded it—the wall to which the victim had been clinging.

There were no hands in sight.

Murray winced, as if in physical pain, but quickly took a step towards the well. He stopped abruptly, for the glow of light fell on to the face of the man who had fallen against him, and the sight of the crimson splash on the forehead told its story. There was death.

Murray shivered; but he hadn't time to waste, hadn't time to be squeamish. He shone the torch on to the other man, who might come round and attack him while he was at the well. The man's eyelids were already fluttering. He had dark hair and aquiline features; and he was darker-skinned than most.

Murray bent over him, yanked off his tie, then turned him over on his face and tied his wrists behind him. He let him fall back and, torch in hand, stepped to the side of the well. He almost prayed that he had been wrong, and that the hands were still in sight, but they were not. He reached the edge and shone the torch down into the cold darkness. For a few seconds he seemed only to see a kind of mist; that was light reflected from the water, shimmering on the surface.

That was all; he saw no head, no hands, no—

Then he saw long, fair hair, floating. It rose slowly to the surface and then stayed there, as if it were a figment of his imagination, or else another reflection of the light; but it wasn't that, it was the hair of a woman.

He saw her shoulders, too.

They were bare, but that did not register clearly; only the fact that she was making no attempt to swim or to tread water. He could not see her face, but could imagine that her eyes were closed, that her mouth was slack and slightly open. He had seen death by drowning often enough to know.

She was twenty feet below him.

Above the well was the rope, coiled round the windlass, and on one side the big, wooden bucket. He shone the torch on to the rope, and it looked old and frayed in places, but very strong. He hoped to heaven it was as strong as it looked. He grabbed the hook which held the handle of the bucket; it was only a loop of strong wire. He wound the rope round his waist twice, then knotted it at the hook. Now it was tied tightly round him, and as he went down, it would unwind. He climbed up on

to the wall, and lowered himself cautiously, feeling cracks in the brick wall, and holes where the plaster had eroded and fallen out. He felt loose bricks, too, and the iron rungs, built into the side of the well. If the victim had chanced upon them she might not have fallen. The light fell bright and clear, but he could see nothing, because of the way he was climbing.

It was much colder.

He pictured that floating hair and the bare shoulders.

He went down, foot by foot, with the rope unwinding above him. One or two of the rungs felt loose, but each one held him. He did not even begin to think about getting back; the only thing that seemed to matter was pulling that girl out of the water.

He went down steadily, and all the time it got colder. He began to shiver so violently that his teeth chattered. How far was he from the surface of the water? He tried to look down, and the light shimmered on the surface, which was very close now, but he did not see the girl.

Was he too late?

If he wasn't careful, he would drown, too.

He put his right foot down and touched the water; it was icy. He flinched and snatched his foot up. A fit of shivering nearly made him lose his grip. When he felt steadier, he plunged his leg boldly into the water, and after the first moment the cold eased.

Now he put all his weight on to one of the rungs, and peered down again, with the torch in his left hand. The water looked inky black, but the surface was rippled, and he could hear it splashing against the side.

There was no sign of the girl.

If she had gone to the bottom there was no telling how long it would be before she came up. She—

There she was!

He saw her hair break the surface first, and then gradually rise until it floated, like some gilded water-lily; and her shoulder broke the surface, too, white as the flowers of a lily.

He lodged the torch against a rung, pointed downwards, and lowered himself bodily. He felt something heavy brush against him. He trod water, then groped for the girl, and felt her slippery shoulders, then her waist. He put his arm round her, holding her close against him, and keeping her head clear of the water. Then he stretched his right arm up, towards the rung beneath the torch. He could see it clearly, but was at least a foot above his fingers, he was in so deep, and with the weight of the girl it was almost impossible to spring upwards.

He had to.

He groped with his foot and found a rung beneath the water, put his weight on it, and leapt up. He touched the slippery iron of a higher rung, then tried again, and clutched it. It held. The sudden weight on his shoulder was excruciating, but he didn't let go, and gradually he tightened his hold. Now he took a chance because it gave him the only hope there was. He eased his grasp on the girl's waist, so as to unhook the rope round his own. He pulled the rope taut, until it would not unwind any further, and then, taking what seemed an age, managed to draw it round them both. Now that the girl was roped to him he shifted her round until she was behind him, with her head just above his left shoulder. That gave him both hands free. He began to climb, a rung at a time, drawing the rope taut at each step. There was a

lot of slack, but if he slipped, he would at least have some hope of getting out of the water.

He could see nothing but the blackness above and below.

Then, after what seemed an age of climbing, he could see the stars. So he was safe, but—was the girl alive?

She seemed limp and lifeless when he hoisted her over the edge of the well, and put her down, it was like putting a corpse on the ground.

He could just make out her shape against the ground, and realised that she had practically nothing on; her body was just a pale blur against the darkness.

There was no sound, except that of his chattering teeth and his heavy breathing.

The torch was still shining, and he took it out of the rung, then shone it on to the men. Even the live one had not moved.

He bent down and lifted the girl again, and started to walk towards the cottage. He limped now. He had locked both the doors before going to bed, and couldn't get in easily, but he could break a window—for he had to get inside, had to get warm, and had to start artificial respiration on the girl. Perhaps he had wasted too much time already. He found himself grinning wryly; 'wasted' was one word. He kept shivering, but movement helped to warm him. He reached the back porch, and could just make out the shape of the window next to it.

He couldn't smash this with his bare hands, and now he was almost frightened; everything seemed to take so long, and the girl was a dead weight. Dead? There was a foot-scraper by the porch and, holding the girl over his shoulder, he bent down and groped for this. He found it, and smashed it against the glass. Then he broke the slivers of glass which stuck out of the window-frame, and fiddled for the catch.

It all took time.

Unfastening the catch, pushing up the window, putting the girl inside the little front room, climbing in himself. *Time.* He groped for the light-switch, and light dazzled him as he turned towards the girl.

She was on the floor; lifeless?

He picked her up and staggered with her into the next room; that window wasn't broken, and in there was a divan.

He lifted her to this and put her face downwards, with her head turned towards one side, and then he went back to lock the door of the room with the broken window.

For more men might come here.

At last he was able to concentrate on the girl. She wore a brassiere and a pair of panties, both peach coloured, and so thin that it made little difference whether she wore them or not. He stood over her, bent down, and put his hands beneath her, against the flat of her stomach, and raised her up and down.

He could see her profile and the way her mouth was open, looking odd where she lay against the divan. Water dribbled out. Her hair clung round her head now, very fair and bright. There was a small scar on the back of her neck, triangular in shape, and there was a mole, just behind her right ear.

Now Murray began to apply artificial respiration, placing his hands on the girl, letting his weight fall on her, easing upwards, leaning again. But he felt hopeless, as if it was a waste of time, and had been from the start. She hadn't had the strength to swim or try to save herself when she had dropped into the water; she might have been unconscious when she had actually fallen, perhaps that had made

her lose her grip.

He worked persistently, and the movement warmed him. Soon sweat dripped off his forehead and on to her back, like little raindrops. Her back was nearly dry now, but her mouth was still slack. He must have been working for nearly half an hour, and his back and shoulders ached, his legs were tired, and all the time there was fear, lest other men should come.

He heard nothing outside. If there were anyone else to take over she might stand a chance, but there wasn't, and he couldn't go on much longer. He wasn't used to it. The girl was as pale as death itself, anyhow, and he began to realise that she was quite lovely.

Beauty, dead?

One thing was certain: if he stopped now she would have no chance at all, and he had to go on until all hope had gone. Kneeling in front of her, he could see only her tiny waist, her shapely legs, and shapely arms—

He saw the bruises on them for the first time, as if someone had twisted the flesh round and round.

'Devils,' he muttered. 'Swine.'

Weight down.

Up.

Down.

Up.

He couldn't keep going much longer. It had been a mistake to put her on the divan, on the floor he could have knelt down.

Weight down.

Up.

He began a silly doggerel of a song, and then swung into the *Song of the Volga Boatmen.* Yo-o-heave-ho. Yo-o- heave-oh. Sometimes he grinned at himself and sometimes he sang solemnly in a muted voice, as if it were essential that he shouldn't stop. The stimulus of the whisky had gone, he was too hot again, and sweat dripped.

Yo-o-heave-ho. Yo-o-heave *ho!*

Suddenly he thought that there was movement, a better colour, hope. He worked with greater eagerness, no longer singing, but tense and hopeful.

The girl's lips moved; the muscles of her mouth and of her neck moved too.

She breathed.

Murray sat in an armchair, smoking a cigarette, with coffee by his side, and the crumbs of a ham sandwich on a plate near it. He wore his topcoat over his shirt and trousers. Two small electric fires made the room very warm, but he welcomed that now.

The girl lay on the divan beneath a heap of blankets which would have been comical in other circumstances. He had found two hot-water bottles and placed them against her body, and after she had come round sufficiently for him to believe she would be all right, he had dried her thoroughly and even tried to dry her hair. When she showed signs of coming out of the present sleep—which was as much coma as sleep—he would give her a little brandy and when she woke, some hot, sweet coffee.

He wasn't worried about her now. The blankets covered her chin, but her mouth

was free, and he could see her cheeks, flushed with warmth.

He felt a deep satisfaction at having saved her, and that had eased the mortification of what he had found outside. For he had gone to make sure all the windows and doors were shut and locked; they had been. He had not gone into the small room with the broken window, but had put a chair beneath the handle of the door, so no one could get in that way. Then he had ventured into the garden, and gone towards the corner where a man had fallen. The man had vanished; dead or alive, he hadn't been there.

Uneasily Murray had ventured to the well and seen the body of the man he had killed, but not the one whose hands he had tied.

Murray had come back, locked the garden door, and then stayed with the girl, alert for any sound, anything to suggest that other men were coming.

No one had come.

It was nearly dawn. The birds were already awake and noisy. The stars were fading into the light of morning. He knew that it was nearly a quarter past six, and that the postman would be here by half-past seven, in his van; he would take a message to Cliff House, nearby, and telephone for the police. It would be a relief of sorts to share this with someone, but he would always have the satisfaction of knowing that he had seen it through himself.

What would the police say about the dead man? His lips twisted wryly when he thought of that, but it didn't worry him even mildly. Other things did. Who was the girl and where had she come from? Obviously she had run away from the men, who had chased and had tried to kill her, rather than allow her to escape alive.

Had they?

There was no proof; it was possible that they had gone to get the girl *out* of the well.

What of the man by the corner?

Murray had to admit that he didn't know a thing—except that the two men had been ready to kill him.

He found himself dozing, waking up, and dozing again. To keep awake somehow, he smoked cigarette after cigarette. At a quarter to seven he got up, made some more coffee and went back into the little lounge. The girl hadn't stirred, but she looked more flushed, more pretty, and was sleeping more naturally. Her hair was almost dry, and fluffy close to the forehead and the temples. It made her look younger, and she had never seemed more than in the early twenties. Now it was possible to believe that she was still in her teens.

Was she too hot?

Murray decided that she wasn't, and went back to his chair, stirring coffee that was nearly black, and hoping that the postman wouldn't be late this morning. He had been staying here for three days, and the man had arrived just before half-past seven each day.

'Not that ten minutes would make any difference, even if he is late,' Murray said to himself, still stirring the coffee. 'This will knock 'em flat in the village.'

He found himself smiling, grateful that the coming of dawn eased his tension and his fears.

'If the *Post-Dispatch* hadn't fired me, I'd probably have walked from here to Cliff House to give them the story,' he mused aloud. 'Life has no equal to a correspondent spurned!' He laughed, and realised that he was not only overtired but suffering from reaction, which would stay until he'd had a few hours' sleep. As

soon as that postman had come—

He stopped thinking about the postman, for the girl moved her head, then began to mutter.

He got up and stepped towards her.

3. Fear

Murray reached her side.

Her condition had changed, drastically. Her eyes were still closed, but there was no peacefulness in her expression; all signs of that had gone. She turned her head from side to side, as if trying to escape from some searching light, and the muttering became louder. It was just a babble of words, and at first he understood none of them, but suddenly a sentence was intelligible.

'I do not know where he is; I do not know.'

She turned her head again, as if trying desperately to avoid that light, or else the searching eyes of a man who was questioning her. She muttered again unintelligibly, and then shouted wildly:

'I do not know where he is!'

'No.'

'No!'

That cry, louder than the rest, had a note of terror; of nightmare.

'No, no, no!' she screamed.

'It's all right,' Murray said, and he felt almost desperate himself, so anxious to calm her. He sat at the side of the bed. putting a hand to her head firmly. 'It's all right, there's no need to worry, I'll look after you.'

'No!' she screamed, and her body was aquiver. 'No!'

Then, her eyes opened.

There was stark terror in them.

She stared in Murray's face, those eyes wide and rounded and an intense blue—the blue, just then, of a bright, metallic flame. She screamed again, not uttering any word, just screaming in her throat, as if she was trapped in hysteria and could not stop herself. As the screams came shrill and piercing, Murray hated the sound, but more than anything else he hated the terror which caused them.

He put his hands on the side of her head and shook her, not hard but firmly, and said:

'You're safe. It's all right. You're safe.'

She didn't stop screaming at first, and he wondered desperately what would make her; then suddenly a scream was cut short. The ensuing silence was almost painful, too. Murray sat there, staring down at her, seeing the gradual change in the expression of her eyes, seeing the terror fade and bewilderment replace it.

He took his hands away, and smiled, and said:

'I drove them off and they haven't come back. You haven't anything more to worry about, so just relax.'

She stared without speaking.

'Just relax,' Murray repeated, 'and don't worry about anything; you're going to be all right.'

He stood up, and moved back a little, limping because his right ankle was weak and painful; he needed a crepe bandage. He smiled at her, hoping that it was reassuringly, and wondered what thoughts were going through her mind, and what she had meant and whom had she been talking about when she had said with such despair: *'I don't know where he is!'*

'You're really all right,' he assured her again. 'It's broad daylight now, and the

postman will be here soon. He'll take a message into the village for us. Don't worry, just relax.'

She gulped, and tried to speak, but her voice was hoarse and strained.

'Who—who are you?'

'I'm staying here for a week or two—the owner is a friend of mine.'

'Where—where am I?' She closed her eyes, and shuddered, and Murray hoped that she wasn't going to submit again to that awful terror; but the screaming did not come, and she looked calmer when she opened her eyes and said: 'I—I remember. This is the cottage. There was—the well.'

'You fell in, and I pulled you out.'

He would probably never dismiss anything more dispassionately than he did that. He had pulled her out; that was the simple truth, and all that mattered. She would never know what an ordeal it had been, and there was no reason why she should. He felt no great sense of urgency now, for he was sure that if the men had meant to attack again they would have come under cover of darkness. It would be another half-hour before the postman arrived, and he could take his time questioning the girl. She could probably do with that coffee now, but if he left her alone too soon, she might be scared again.

'Thank—thank you,' she said, quite out of the blue.

That struck him as so funny that he chuckled.

'Pleasure! And if you relax, in a few hours you'll feel as good as ever.' He deliberately delayed asking questions; the important thing was to lead her back to normal at her own pace, as there was plenty of time. 'I'll get you a cup of coffee in a minute.'

'Thank you,' she repeated as if it really didn't matter.

'Like a cigarette?'

'No, thank you.'

She stared intently, as if trying to decide whether he was just what he claimed, whether there was really no need to fear. He sat back, drawing at the cigarette, reminding himself that there was no hurry, yet wishing that she would start to talk more freely. Perhaps if he left her alone it would help her, after all.

He stood up.

'If I go and make that coffee, will you be all right? I'll only be a few minutes.'

'Yes,' she whispered. 'Quite all right.'

He thought she looked even younger, but that was partly because of her flushed cheeks, which made her complexion more like that of a child's, a baby's. It gave added brightness to her blue eyes, too. Now that her hair was fluffier, she was quite something to see.

'Just call out if you want anything,' he said, and smiled and turned away.

The kitchen was on the other side of the tiny hall of the cottage. 'Hall' was really too dignified a term. The front door opened on to it, and to the right was the door of this room, to the left a door leading to the big kitchen and, beyond that, the scullery; immediately opposite the front door was the flight of narrow stairs which led to the two bedrooms. The cottage had recently been redecorated for use as a summer residence for the Abbotts, who owned it, and some time ago he had rented it for the winter, when the Abbotts were usually on tour abroad. One thought of them as *the* Abbotts, the most famous comedy team on the English stage.

The cottage had also been wired for electricity, but the only running water was in the scullery, and there was no telephone. With the big house a mile in one direction

and the village two miles or more in the other—due west, along the coast—it was as lonely a spot as one would find on the south coast of England.

He stepped into the kitchen; he need only heat the coffee, stir in plenty of sugar, and then—

He stopped thinking about that.

He glanced out of the window, and caught sight of someone moving. He looked more closely. There was the back garden, the well was in sight, and the apple-tree with every branch bowed down with fruit and looking top heavy because most of the leaves were gone. For a moment nothing happened, but suddenly the movement was repeated.

Two men moved from the cover of the hedge towards the side of the house, and Murray recognised one of them as the man whom he had caught, and who had escaped.

So he had been wrong.

Now his heart began to beat with a return of desperate fear.

He saw other men, two of them near the well, carrying something on an old garden hurdle.

It was the body of the little man whom Murray had shot. Nothing was covering the body, but the wound in his head was no longer crimson; it looked brown.

Then the first two men appeared again, only to disappear from sight as they drew close to the wall of the house. He felt quite sure they were heading for the front door, intent on breaking in.

'The ruddy nerve,' he said aloud.

His own words didn't fool him, or hide the truth, that sight of these men and knowledge of their ruthlessness scared him.

What would happen if they tried to get into the lounge, and the girl saw them?

Murray moved swiftly into the other room, where the girl had her back to him. There was no immediate danger of the men getting in, and they couldn't surprise him, for they would have to smash a window or break down a door. The mantelpiece clock said ten minutes past seven, so he had to keep them at bay for at least twenty minutes. But his mood had changed. He had a loaded gun, hadn't he? He'd counted the bullets, and there were six in all. That ought to be enough to give him a chance.

He saw a face at the window—the face of the man whom he had knocked out.

It appeared there just for a moment, then the man dodged out of sight. Murray was in the doorway, and he didn't think that he had been noticed. The girl probably hadn't seen the man either; from where she was lying it would be difficult to see the window, and she didn't appear to have turned her head.

Then Murray saw the man again, with a gun levelled at the girl.

Murray had his gun in his hand. Fear made his heart pound as he took aim, desperately frightened lest the man in the window got his shot in first. A split second could make the difference between life and death.

Murray fired.

His bullet shattered the window, and as it smashed, he flung himself into the room and to the girl's side. Only one thing mattered: to drag her out of sight of the window and out of the range of the gunman. He saw the man dodge back. The hole that leapt into the glass was almost big enough to climb through, but great splinters

stuck out from the side. He reached the couch, and saw the girl.

She was staring at the window, transfixed with horror; as if everything that she had feared had happened and she knew that this time there could be no escape. She didn't see Murray, who bent down and grabbed the couch and dragged it towards the wall—and the moment gave him desperate strength, for she was out of danger before he stopped, with one side of the couch close to the wall itself.

He pressed tightly against the wall, so that he could not be seen, and edged towards the window. The man would probably try to get as near as he could, might take a chance and thrust his arm and head and shoulders through the window, and shoot at the girl from there.

He didn't.

Murray saw something come through the hole in the window, curve through the air, and then drop on to the tiles round the fireplace. It shattered, like fragile glass, and a little wisp of vapour appeared, so tenuous that it was hard to realise that it might be deadly, that it was certainly intended to stop Murray from fighting back.

4. The Gas

Murray had so little time to think.

Except for that half an hour after the girl had started to breathe again, he had not really had a moment's peace since this had started. He felt exactly as he had when he'd been woken by the shot, and his heart hammered. The only difference was that now he knew what there was to fear.

The man in the window, and the gas.

He couldn't be sure what the gas was, could only guess that it might be lethal. The little cloud still hovered over the shattered glass container, and he fancied that he could smell something faintly sharp and acid. If that gas spread he could be quite sure that he wouldn't have a chance to help the girl, but it had fallen on the tiled hearth, very close to the fireplace itself; some of the grey vapour was curling towards the window, and some was being drawn up the chimney by the draught caused by the open door.

Murray said: 'Must cover it up.'

The thought was no sooner in his mind than he acted, turning round, and pulled the top blanket off the girl. He knew exactly what risk he was taking as he took long strides towards the fireplace, with his back to the window. If the little man was waiting with his gun, this would be the end of his attempt to save the girl.

He held the blanket out with both hands, and then threw himself forward. That might serve two purposes—evade a bullet, and enable him to hold the blanket at the right height to put over the fumes; he did not want to throw the blanket, or it might waft the fumes so that a dangerous quantity could escape.

Almost gently, he placed the blanket over the fireplace, so that one side was on the floor, the hearth was covered, and the other side of the blanket nearly covered the chimney opening. Then he spun round. He couldn't understand why he hadn't been fired at. The broken window opened on to the trees and the garden, but no one was there, and no one appeared to be standing close to the wall just outside.

What were they doing now?

Then he heard a new sound, the engine of a car coming along the road.

Who—

The postman!

He realised who it was almost as soon as he heard the engine. The man was early, not late; *early.* He always drove towards the cottage at sixty miles an hour, Murray knew, and pulled up just outside the little gate which opened on to a path leading to the front door. On two mornings Murray had been up to go and meet him.

The van was slowing down.

The men in the garden had turned from Murray to the newcomer; they would see their danger as quickly as Murray saw hope which could easily turn into disaster. He moved towards the door, and saw the girl staring at him with her eyes wide open, as if her terror was greater than she had ever known. Her mouth was open, too, and he could just see her teeth. He doubted whether she really noticed him; she was just staring at the ceiling, holding her breath, too frightened even to breathe.

'. . . be all right,' Murray muttered.

He reached the front door, and did not hesitate to open it, although he knew it

could be fatal if he was wrong in believing that the men would keep to the side of the house —so that the postman would not see them until he was coming along the path. Obviously the van was going to stop here; in fact the engine cut out as Murray opened the front door.

He thrust his gun forward.

It was all right so far; no one was in sight, except the postman, who was already thrusting the door of the van open. He was a young, fair-haired, bright-eyed man, with a jaunty walk and lively wit and ready tongue, and obviously he was doing two things at once: selecting Murray's letters, and opening the door of his van.

He pushed the door wide open, and looked towards the cottage.

Murray was already on the porch.

The postman jumped down, and waved.

'Get back in the van!' Murray shouted, and he tried to make every word loud and clear. 'Get back! Drive for help. I'm being attacked. *Drive for help!'* he repeated desperately, as the postman stood there, listening and gaping, obviously quite unaware of his own danger. *'Armed men; drive for help!'*

'Armed—' the postman seemed to say, and then he must have realised exactly what Murray meant. Perhaps he also realised the significance of another car which was parked in the road; perhaps he saw one of the men crouching by the side of the house. Whatever the cause, he turned round as swiftly as a cat, and jumped towards his van.

If he was fired at—

He got in and slammed the door as a bullet struck the panel. The crack of sound from the side of the house was starkly clear. He seemed to start the engine and ease off the brake in the same instant, and the van began to move forward. Two more shots rang out, two bullets struck the van and gave off a hollow, booming note; then the van seemed to roar along the road.

And the man who was shooting appeared at the corner of the cottage.

Murray had expected him, and was waiting. He fired twice, then backed swiftly away. He heard what might have been a gasp, as if he'd hit the man. He slammed the door and put up the chain; at least the door was of solid oak, and it wouldn't give way easily.

But would the men stay? Would they make another effort to break in?

He asked himself that as it dawned on him that one of them might have doubled back and shot the girl through the window. He had heard four shots, and only three had hit the side of the post-office van. The other might—

He reached the lounge.

She was still safe. Her face was buried in the pillow now, as if she was too frightened even to look at the window. He reached her, and pulled off several of the blankets, leaving just one round her, and nervously she peered up at him through her fingers.

'Better go upstairs,' he told her jerkily. 'Postman's gone for help; it won't be long now.' He didn't know whether she had heard, and didn't greatly care. He lifted her bodily, grunting with the effort, and then turned towards the door and the stairs. His ankle hurt more sharply, but still held him. He reached the foot of the stairs and went up steadily, reached his bedroom and went in. He kicked the door to, then put the girl on his bed, and went back and locked the door.

'Oh, they haven't a chance,' he said, and he realised that sweat was pouring down his face, and that he was shivering again. 'They just haven't a chance; the

police will be here in ten minutes or less. Don't worry.'

More likely it would be twenty before help came; allow five minutes for the postman to reach the village, five minutes or even ten to find the local policeman and probably other help, another five to get back. Yes, there were still twenty minutes to worry about; they certainly weren't in the clear yet.

But now that he and the girl were upsatirs, what could the men downstairs do? Toss more of that gas inside? He went and closed the window, and managed to grin at the girl as he passed her. Smoke them out? They seemed desperate enough to do even that, but he needn't worry; even if they set fire to the place, the police and the postman would be here before they were driven out.

He could take it easy.

Two minutes later he heard the car engine start up, and believed that the men outside were leaving.

They were.

Murray stood by the window and watched them, three men in all, getting into the car, a big Austin, and he could even see the body of the man he had shot, huddled in a corner to make room for the others, in an oddly stiff position. Before the door closed, the car was moving off. He tried to make out the number, but it was covered with mud. He saw the Austin heading for the hill, and realised then that it must have coasted down, so that he had not heard it approach. It was going away from the village and in the direction of Cliff House.

At least he needn't fear that it would come back.

He dabbed his forehead and his neck, and turned round towards the girl. The blanket fell loosely over her, but one bare leg poked out, slim and smooth; she had nice ankles and small, white feet. One arm was out of the blanket, too. Her hair, now nearly dry, was spread out over his pillow. He had dumped her down as if she had been a sack of potatoes, and she hadn't moved.

She didn't move, simply looked up, her eyes asking the questions; but she was no longer so tense, something in his manner must have told her what the answer would be.

'It's all safe now,' he said firmly. 'They've really gone and you can be sure that they won't come back this time. Don't worry at all.' He smiled down at her, and felt quite as cheerful as he sounded. 'In ten minutes or so the police will be here, so there's nothing to fear.'

'There—there really isn't,' she said in a husky voice, and again she added: 'Thank you.' There was pathos in the way she said that, and there was something else which was much more puzzling. She didn't behave as one might expect an English girl to behave: her words were too precise and she spoke too carefully.

Give her a little make-up, and she would be really beautiful.

He found himself with nothing to say, and with nothing to do. He felt limp and very tired as he sat on the foot of the bed and studied her. Odd situation. Both of them here, the vitality drained out of them, looking at each other without saying a word. There was nothing he wanted to say at the moment, except ask questions, and he made himself hold back; she had been through enough already, and there would be plenty of questions when the police arrived.

They couldn't be much longer.

'Sure you won't have that cigarette?' he asked, and when she shook her head, he lit one for himself, and stood up, restlessly. He went to the window, turning his

back on the girl, and looked out towards the sea. There it was in the distance, shimmering in the early morning sun. It was visible from here, but not from the ground-floor windows. Between the end of the garden and the top of the cliffs was meadow- land, and fringing the cliffs a stout fence, to make sure that cattle didn't wander dangerously close to the cliff itself.

In the distance were the rocks which stood out at Cliff Point, and on the point was Cliff House. The peacefulness of the scene, even to the cattle already browsing, made such a contrast with what had happened that Murray had found himself thinking of it almost as of a nightmare. But he had only to turn round and look at the girl to know how real it was.

Real?

There was a quality of unreality about her. It was not only that she looked so young and fresh, with her red. glowing cheeks and her blue eyes, but there was a simplicity which he didn't quite understand—for instance, the way that 'thank you' always came out so oddly. He also remembered her fear even when she had been asleep, and how she had clung to the wall round the well, and what she must have felt when she had dropped down. There were the bruises round her arm to remember, too, and suddenly thought of them made him angry. He turned round more quickly than he had before, and obviously startled her.

'Sorry,' he said. 'I didn't mean to make you jump. You are English, aren't you?'

'Oh, yes.'

'I didn't intend to worry you with questions,' Murray went on, 'but it's just occurred to me that when the police come they'll have to ask plenty. Would you care to tell me what it's all about? Then I can tell them, and they needn't worry you so much.'

He waited, not very hopeful when she didn't respond at once. But nor did she look away from him. He was surprised to know that she was English; that primness of speech would have been easier to understand had she been a Scandinavian—or anyone to whom English was not a native tongue.

Then, she said quietly: 'There is very little I can tell you. I have been living out of England for many years, with my relations." She paused. 'They have been very kind to me. A week ago my uncle sent me back to England. I do not really know why,' she added, and frowned a little, as if she was trying to understand, 'but my cousins told me that it would not be for long. I was to stay with an aunt of mine, in a part of London which I do not know very well. Is it Hamp- stead?'

'It could be.'

'I think it is called Hampstead. I took a taxi to Hampstead from the air terminal at Victoria, but when I arrived near the house strangers met me and I was compelled to enter another taxi with them. I believe that I was drugged,' she added, and the way she said it made it sound like slapstick. 'I am not sure, but I know that I slept very heavily. When I woke up, I was in another house, and these men asked me many questions.'

She paused.

'What about?' Murray asked.

'All of them the same question, perhaps in different ways,' she told him. 'They wished to know where my uncle was, and I could not tell them, because I did not know. Last night—' She broke off, frowning, and looked at the daylight at the window and the brightness of the morning, and was quiet for what seemed a long time. Then she went on: 'I think it was last night, but so much happened that I

cannot be sure. I—I ran away. They had locked me in a room, but there was a small window, and I climbed out. They had taken my clothes, but ‘ She shrugged, as if that couldn’t matter less. ‘From the window I had seen this cottage, and I came here. When I was near, they reached me, and I tried to hide, inside the well.’

She broke off again: and her eyes were narrowed and her voice was taut; something of the fear was back.

‘Had you ever seen these men before?’ Murray asked.

‘No, not at any time.’

‘Where were you living with your uncle?’

‘On the Island of Canna,’ the girl declared, and now something other than the drama of her story affected Murray, for Canna was an island very much in the news; one didn’t have to be a ‘resting’ foreign correspondent to know that. He could believe that the aquiline face of the man who had tried to kill him was that of a native of that island too; he had been there, knew how distinctive they were, in spite of the strain of Arab blood. ‘Do you know Canna?’ the girl asked.

‘I know it very well.’ Murray heard a car engine in the distance and felt sure that it was the police—or a policeman back with the postman, who deserved a gold medal and a handsome bonus for his morning’s work; not many people would behave so coolly when under fire.

‘What is your uncle’s name?’ Murray asked, almost idly.

Her eyes were rounded, and he had the impression that she was watching him more closely than before, almost as if she was appraising him. Then she spoke very quietly and yet firmly.

‘I would prefer not to tell you, yet.’

The car engine was nearer; it sounded very like the post- office van. Murray, startled by her answer, puzzled and even mildly amused, smiled at the girl as he stood up.

‘That’s up to you,’ he said, ‘but at least you can tell me who you are.’

‘Of course,’ the girl said. ‘I am Juanita Lang.’

‘Juanita Lang,’ Murray echoed. The name Lang seemed to strike some chord in his memory, too, but he couldn’t call it to mind. There had been a lot of Spanish influence in Canna, centuries ago, and the name Juanita did not occur to him as strange. ‘All right, Juanita Lang,’ he said. ‘I’d better go and let the police in, But before I do, I’ll make you more comfortable.’

‘You go and speak to them,’ said Juanita. ‘I am well enough to straighten this bed and to make myself tidy, now.’

She gave that almost prim little smile, and Murray smothered a grin as he turned from the room. There was a *honky-honk-honk* on the van horn, obviously meant to be reassuring, and he opened the front door. At first he opened it only an inch or two, but he saw the van and then pulled it wide.

The postman was jumping out.

The door on this side of the van opened, and a constable climbed down, ponderously, wearing his thick blue serge and his tall helmet and, when he turned to face the cottage, showing that he was carrying a truncheon. Faced with half- a-dozen desperadoes, all armed with guns, he would probably have made exactly the same approach.

The postman came hurrying, to join him, and the two men approached the cottage.

5. Request

At first Murray did not see what the postman was carrying, but suddenly he recognised a shotgun. The postman held the barrel down by his legs, obviously to make sure that it wouldn't be noticed, and looked right and left, as if half prepared for more trouble. Murray waved. The postman broke into a run, but the policeman came on at a steady pace, swinging his truncheon at first, but soon, apparently satisfied that it would not be needed, tucking it away into some secret place inside his clothes.

The sun glinted on the postman's reddish hair, and his freckles were like tiny spots of pale brown paint.

'Everything okay now, sir?' He wasn't even slightly breathless as he drew up. 'Drove the so-and-so's off, did you?' There was no stint of admiration in his eyes and in his voice. 'Nice work.'

'When they knew you'd gone for help they soon threw their hands in,' Murray said, and went on quickly: 'And one of these days I hope to find a way of thanking you.'

'Oh, forget it,' the postman said, and turned round towards the policeman and called: 'They've all gone, Bob; nothing to worry about. But put a move on, can't you? I've got me letters to deliver.'

Murray was offering cigarettes.

'Thank you, sir. Ta. While I think of it,' went on the postman briskly, 'I didn't know how many of the swine there was, so I got the cop—the constable,' he amended hastily, for the policeman was only a few paces away, 'to telephone Hilberry Camp. Very nice chap, the C.O. up there. Be a detachment of the military here before we know what's what—just on a patrol of course. I thought it better to be on the safe side.'

'You couldn't have been more right,' said Murray, and turned to the policeman. 'Morning, constable. You didn't lose much time.'

'Understood it was an emergency, sir,' the constable said in a rich, slow voice. 'No, thank you, I won't smoke now.' He looked about the garden as if he found it hard to believe the story the postman had told him. 'These persons used firearms, I understand.'

'Proper ruddy ambush,' the postman interpolated.

'Have you any idea which way they have gone?' asked the policeman, ponderous but certainly dogged. 'When the military happen to arrive on the scene, it might be possible for them to. . .'

'That way,' Murray said, and pointed. 'But that's only part of the story, constable.'

'That so, sir?' Rather small, cloudy blue eyes took on a look of cautious interest. 'May I ask if you were injured in any way?'

'Not seriously,' Murray said. In fact there was a graze on his shoulder, which he'd almost forgotten, and his ankle.

He stopped speaking, and tried to get the story into shape for telling in such a way that it wouldn't sound incredulous. Told badly, it would seem even worse: incredible. There was the postman's evidence that he had been fired at, but the bodies had gone from the well at the corner, and when he himself tried to carry his thoughts back to what had happened, he found it difficult. The policeman was

probably excellent at his job, but asking him to grasp this story was like asking a master of simple mathematics to cope with the theory and practice of nuclear research. Yet as he hesitated, Murray was keenly conscious of the policeman's gaze, and his hesitation even seemed to puzzle the postman.

He had to tell it simply; and he couldn't tell it all—not yet at all events.

'Were you about to make a statement, sir?' the constable remarked politely. He hadn't yet taken out his notebook, but his hand was fidgeting.

'Yes, I'll make a statement,' Murray said, 'and I know you'd like it to be as brief as possible. A girl came here during the night, after escaping from some people who'— he boggled at the word 'kidnapped', but it had to come out, and he watched for the effect—'who had kidnapped her. Apparently they spent some time looking for her, and discovered that she was here. They wanted her back.'

Polite incredulity.

'Kidnapped,' the postman echoed hoarsely.

'Is the young lady here now, sir?' the policeman asked.

'Yes. But asleep, or next door to it. She's had a very rough time, and I'm wondering whether we could have a doctor or a nurse to have a look at her, before she's disturbed.' -

The policeman began to play with a bright pocket button. A new expression crept into his eyes, and something in his manner made him seem to grow in stature; nature hadn't made him a fool, just a cautious man.

'Kidnapped,' the postman repeated helplessly, and looked about as if he expected to see some evidence of it; Long John Silver, for instance, lurking at the corner. But there was only the garden, the few late roses, the apple-trees and, in sight, two of three cows grazing.

'You wouldn't know the young lady's name, sir, would you?' asked the policeman.

'Yes. At least, I can give you the name she gave me. Lang—Juanita Lang.'

As he heard that, the policeman's expression changed again, puzzling Murray, and there was a look akin to cunning in his eyes. He turned away for the first time, to look towards the road and the direction of Hilberry Camp, and it was almost possible to hear him thinking that he hoped the 'military' wouldn't be long 'happening by'. He moistened his lips, then squared his heavy shoulders and echoed:

'Miss Juanita Lang, sir? And she—she just arrived here during the night.'

'That's right.'

'I see,' said the constable and looked towards the brow of the hill again. He wasn't rewarded with the sight of an army vehicle, but there was a sound of a heavy engine, some distance off; the noisy kind of engine that was likely to be in an army truck. 'And she's upstairs now, sir?'

'Yes. In my bedroom.'

'Hmm,' repeated the constable. 'Upstairs?'

'Yes.' Murray felt a moment of extreme irritation, yet realised that the policeman had something heavy on his mind—and he was much more anxious than he had been to see the troops who were on their way. 'Yes, upstairs,' repeated Murray, 'and don't go into the downstairs room on the right.'

That made the policeman look away from the distant hill.

'Why not, sir?'

'These chaps tossed a phial of gas in, and I didn't like the look of it.'

'*Poison* gas?'

'I wouldn't like to take a deep breath in it,' Murray said dryly. 'As soon as the others come, we could use a gas squad.'

'They'll soon be able to look after that, sir,' said the policeman, and now he became downright nervous. 'Decontamination squad wanted, quick as possible, eh? The young lady isn't in any danger, is she?'

'She was all right when I left her. But. . .'

Murray stopped, abruptly; for the first time he realised that some of the men might have been hiding at the back, and might have crept up to the cottage to finish their job. He moved swiftly, in sharp alarm, and before either of the others could stop him; but the garden at the rear of the cottage was empty too.

He came back, and tried to make out what worried the village policeman so much. Obviously, the man was on edge, but he hadn't been until the girl's name had been mentioned: why should 'Juanita Lang' affect him so? Murray kept silent for what seemed a long time, and the postman broke his uneasy quiet.

'Here's a lark to tell the missus,' he said half jocularly. 'Not that she'll ever believe me, though. But I've still got the post to deliver, Bob; is it okay for me to get cracking?'

'No!' The constable almost shouted the word, as if he was nervous at the possibility of being left here alone with Murray. 'No,' he repeated more quietly; 'better wait until someone else comes along, Syd. Shouldn't be long, if that's the army patrol.'

He stared at the brow of the hill again, and this time a large army truck swung into sight, moving at a good pace. It gathered speed and momentum as it came down the hill, too fast for Murray's peace of mind.

'This young lady, sir, do you know where she escaped from?'

'The only place I can think of is Cliff House. That's . . .'

'I know it,' said the constable. 'Did you see the car these men escaped in?'

'A biggish black Austin, but I couldn't distinguish the number.'

'Thank you, sir.' The constable turned to look towards the approaching soldiers, and went on quietly:

'Looks as if there's an officer with them. You two stay here, will you? while I have a word with them.' He promptly stalked off, but hadn't gone five yards before he beckoned the postman. 'Hey, Syd,' he called; 'come here a minute, will you?'

The postman walked towards him. Murray watched and strained his ears to catch what was said, but failed; yet he could guess what it was, for the postman nodded, his coppery hair looking redder than it had earlier, and he shifted his hold on the shotgun and gave Murray a look that was almost suspicious.

'I don't know what's going on,' Murray said mildly, 'but you needn't worry, Syd; I shan't run away.'

The postman turned scarlet. Murray grinned. Then they both laughed.

'That's a funny thing,' the postman said.

'What is?'

'You mentioning Cliff House,' the postman explained. 'First time for over two weeks I haven't had anything for the house. Let to a Mr. Mikolas, since Mr. Abbott went up to London. What about *that*! The servants are all little dark chaps.'

'You'd better not lose any time telling the law about that,' Murray said dryly.

He backed a little and listened, but he heard nothing. He saw the men jumping down from the truck—six of them in all, young, spruce-looking youngsters in khaki,

each carrying a rifle, except the one who looked youngest, and was obviously a very junior lieutenant. He came striding towards the policeman. They stopped together in the gateway, the policeman's head bent, as if he wanted to make sure that only the officer heard about this.

What was electric about the name Juanita Lang?

Why was Lang. . .

'Ah!' exclaimed Murray, with satisfaction. 'Judge Lang of Canna. Of course.'

He knew now why the name was familiar, but it wasn't really surprising that it had taken so long. The days of Judge Lang and the Isle of Canna were deep in the past.

Ten years? Fifteen? He didn't know; and he knew little of the details, but he did know that Judge Lang had been virtually a Solomon to the island, and that there had been great public mourning when he had left. Hadn't he married one of the Canna women? Murray wasn't quite sure, just had a recollection that there had been some kind of romance. Scandal? He didn't know.

The young officer was now talking to one of the men who carried a walkie-talkie outfit. He saluted, and then began to transmit a message, presumably back to camp. So this was all being taken very seriously. Then the remaining soldiers and the subaltern came up, briskly. Two of the soldiers split from the main party, obviously under instructions, and doubled towards the back of the house; that was sensible enough. The constable was hard put to it to keep up with the officer, but when the man drew up to the front door, he was only a yard or two behind.

The subaltern was no more than twenty-one. He was fair- haired—rather like the girl—and looked as if he shaved once a fortnight, and that only as a matter of pride. His eyes were honey-brown and very clear, and in his clean-cut way he was a nice boy. Murray, at thirty-five, felt like his grandfather.

'Morning, sir.'

'Good morning, lieutenant.'

'I understand that Miss Juanita Lang is upstairs.'

'That's right.'

'Thank you, sir,' the lieutenant said. 'Do you mind if the constable and I go and speak to her?' He took Murray by surprise, and slipped between him and the front door, and he behaved as if he half-expected Murray to want to stop him. That was even more puzzling. Up till now it had been almost amusing, too, but Murray began to find it irritating.

He hid his feelings.

'No objection at all, but I'm coming up with you. There's another matter, though —about the house along the road. It...'

'That's being taken care of,' the subaltern said. 'I had a message radioed. What makes you insist on coming with us to see Miss Lang?'

'She's had a rough time, and I don't want to spring new faces on her.'

'What kind of rough time?' the subaltern asked sharply.

Murray said: 'It took me about an hour to bring her round; if you've ever applied artificial respiration for that length of time you'll know it was a pretty worrying business; she might have died on me.'

'Artificial...' the subaltern began.

'Do you mean you saved her *life,* sir?' the policeman demanded.

'That's one way of putting it,' Murray said. 'If you must be mysterious, but don't act as if I'm suspect.'

He pushed roughly past the young officer and went inside, leading the way upstairs. By the time he reached the bedroom door, he was able to laugh at himself and his anger, but he knew that it wouldn't take much to annoy him again.

He tapped at the door.

The officer was only just behind, almost touching his elbow and the policeman stood at the top of the stairs.

Both stared towards the door with such intensity that Murray was almost affected by their fears, and almost afraid of what he would see when he went inside.

There was no answer.

He tapped again. 'Can I come in, Miss Lang?'

There was a pause, then: 'Yes, please come in.'

'You two wait until I call you in,' Murray said, and opened the door.

The girl was sitting up in bed, and she had slipped her arms into a pyjama jacket which she must have found in the chest of drawers in a corner of the room. It was buttoned up to her chin. The colour was bright blue. Her cheeks were still rather flushed, and her eyes brighter than Murray had yet seen—probably brighter than any eyes he had seen. Her fresh beauty made him catch his breath. She was much calmer, and that was a tribute to the quality of her spirit, as well as to her steady nerve. She looked at him with an intensity which was almost embarrassing, but he took little notice of that. He had to warn her that the others were coming in, and that he probably hadn't saved her from being questioned, after all.

He told her.

Her expression changed, and the bright eagerness faded from her eyes. But she raised no objection, and Murray called:

'All right, come in.'

He continued to watch her as she looked at the two men, and he wondered what had affected them, what there was about this girl to cause such quickening tension.

6. News From Canna

Juanita's effect on the young subaltern was almost comical. Apparently he had not expected beauty or the bright blue eyes which stared at him with the candour which was so remarkable in any girl. He stopped half-way across the room, and after a moment's pause, saluted.

'Er—Miss Lang?'

'Yes,' said Juanita.

'Excuse me, miss,' said the constable into a lull which began to pall, 'but can you give us any kind of evidence of identity?'

Juanita looked at him as if she didn't understand, and then turned to Murray for interpretation.

'He means, can you prove that you're Juanita Lang?' explained Murray, straight-faced.

'Prove the truth?' She looked at the policeman, obviously annoyed, while the subaltern appeared to be about to speak, and then thought better of it. The girl seemed to hypnotise him; he couldn't look away from her, was virtually oblivious of everything and everyone else. 'What on earth do you mean?' she finished.

'Well, miss, if you've any document, such as a letter, or. . .'

'I have not,' said Juanita coldly. 'My name in Juanita Lang, and I come from the Island of Canna.'

It would not have surprised Murray had she coloured furiously, for probably she thought immediately of all the 'proof' she could offer—a pair of flimsy panties and a brassiere which were downstairs in the kitchen; he'd put them over the towel-rail. He had the impression that Juanita had led so sheltered a life that she would shock as easily as the Victorians.

He couldn't have been wrong.

Her eyes sparkled, as if she saw the joke, her lips relaxed, and all hint of annoyance vanished. This seemed to puzzle the policeman and to relieve the subaltern's anxiety, for he smiled broadly.

'No, I am afraid I cannot offer you any proof,' Juanita said sweetly, 'unless you can suggest something, Mr. Murray?'

'You had nothing much to prove anything when I found you,' Murray said solemnly, and Juanita burst out laughing.

There were depths to Juanita which Murray hadn't even suspected; she was going to be worth getting to know. But there was something else, too. Excitement and brandy in her coffee had kept her going like this but it was a hard brightness which wasn't likely to last for long. When reaction from the relief came, her spirits would probably drop completely.

'Constable, does it really matter whether she can prove who she is or not?' Murray asked. 'If you carry on like this much longer you'll make yourself offensive.'

'I don't mean to do anything like that, sir,' the policeman said apologetically, 'but you must admit that the circumstances are a little out of the ordinary.' No understatement would ever be more masterly. 'Is there a telephone in the house, sir?'

'Afraid not.'

'I can send my chaps. . .' the subaltern began.

‘I know what I’ll do,’ decided the constable. ‘I’ll ask Syd to go to the station—it won’t take him long—and after that he can get on with his mail delivery. Anything you require, Miss—er—Lang?’

‘I’d like to know why you think I’m lying to you,’ she said, sweetly.

‘Oh, don’t think *that,* miss,’ the constable assured her, but he didn’t turn a hair; the subaltern did enough hair turning for a dozen country policemen. ‘Very sorry you’ve had such an unpleasant time, and I’ll arrange for a doctor to come very soon.’

‘Oh, don’t be ridiculous; I don’t need a doctor.’

‘Just to check up, miss,’ the constable said, soothingly. ‘That’s all. Would you mind telling me exactly what happened?’

Juanita told him precisely what she had told Murray, and added a little, under questioning. Her uncle, apparently a leader on the island, had some political problems and had wanted her to leave Canna until they were solved.

The first time she had realised that anything was wrong was after her taxi had stopped near the house of her aunt, in Hampstead. Two men had forced her into another taxi, one had threatened her with a gun—the other had jabbed a needle into her arm.

She remembered nothing after that, until she had woken in a house not far from here, and escaped and been followed. She did not know who had tried to help her, but knew that someone had; the unknown man at the corner, Murray realised.

Apparently satisfied, the constable led the way out of the room, the subaltern followed, and before the door was closed, Juanita looked up at Murray, half smiling, half frowning; then she asked so clearly that the two men at the door could not fail to hear:

‘Are they quite normal, do you think?’

‘Oh, I should think so,’ Murray said with a grin, ‘and with luck we’ll soon know what it’s all about. Haven’t you any idea?’

‘I have not.’ Now her eyes sparkled. ‘And please don’t you start...’

‘Sorry,’ Murray said hastily. ‘No offence intended!’ He stood looking down at her, while the policeman made impatient noises from the door. ‘I’ll be back as soon as I’ve sorted some of the things out,’ he promised firmly. ‘Why don’t you take a nap?’

‘I’ll try,’ she said. ‘As a matter of fact, though. .

‘Yes?’

‘I would love a cup of tea and some toast.’

‘I’ll fix it at once,’ Murray promised, and he went out and closed the door.

Both the men were waiting on the tiny landing, and neither made any comment, although the soldier’s colour was still high. They went downstairs like a platoon of the Home Guard, and at the bottom Murray said:

‘I’m going to make some tea and toast and take it up to her. If one of you would care to explain while I’m doing it, I’d be grateful, but don’t exert yourselves.’

‘As a matter of fact, sir,’ said the constable with heavy deliberation, ‘yesterday afternoon a general call was put out to all police stations and branches, for information leading to the apprehension of Miss Juanita Lang, who has been missing from her home. I can’t tell you any more than that, sir, except that all military establishments, naval and air-force establishments, civil airports and termini of all kinds were also requested to keep an eye open for the young lady. If you don’t mind me saying so, it was a bit of a shock to find her here, especially as I understand from the call that she had been forcibly abducted from her home.’ He

gave Murray a straight look. ‘But if you know nothing about it, then there’s nothing for you to worry about, is there?’

‘No, constable, there isn’t,’ agreed Murray, almost humbly. ‘I’ll go and make that tea.’

If such a widespread call had been put out for the girl, it made her something precious, and Murray did not doubt that it was connected with her uncle’s political problems. The sharp-featured man undoubtedly came from the island, the girl’s association was with the island, and Judge Lang . . .

He wished he could remember more about Judge Lang, but fifteen or twenty years ago he hadn’t been seriously interested in outposts of the Empire—or, as they were now called, crucial areas in the defence strategy of the west.

He made tea and toast, boiled some eggs, and took a tray up to Juanita. She was hungry enough to relish food. He knew that many things were happening in a minor key, outside. Another squad of soldiers had come, complete with gasmasks, and gone into the lounge; the subaltern might be easily embarrassed and very young, but he knew his job. The postman hurried off. A car-load of men in plain clothes had arrived, but so far none of these had shown any interest in Murray or in Juanita. When he took the tray downstairs, however, Murray saw that guards were stationed not only at the gate, but at each vantage spot in the garden. Two were by the well, and the plain-clothes men were obviously very busy there, searching the ground. One man was sitting on the edge of the well itself, and appeared to be staring down, as if he hoped that the water would talk, or that he would discover a new oracle.

From the front door, Murray saw the newspaper man on a motor-cycle pull up outside the gates. The guards stopped him. A third soldier went at the double to take the newspapers—there should be *The Times* and the *Post-Dispatch,* because even though he had been fired, it remained an excellent newspaper of the popular kind.

He took the newspaper from the soldier messenger.

‘Thanks.’

‘Very good, sir.’

Murray went into the kitchen. He couldn’t go into the lounge, for the door was locked and padlocked—he had not been told what the gas squad had discovered, and was quite prepared to believe that it had been nothing more than tear gas. He sat on a comer of the kitchen table, and as he did so realised for the first time what the situation really implied. He was a prisoner on his own cottage, and until he was given permission, would not be able to leave.

And if Juanita Lang had been a princess of royal blood, they couldn’t guard her more closely.

He unfolded the *Post-Dispatch,* and his gaze roamed over the headlines on the front page, absorbing rather than reading, mentally marking those stories he would want to read first. Then he saw the end column headline, and his eyebrows shot up.

Policeman Murdered in Canna
Terrorist attack

Murray read the story quickly.

It told him little more than the headline, but it sickened him. There had been

rumours of political unrest in Canna for some time, but few people had, taken it seriously, the one colony which appeared to have exactly what it and its natives wanted. No details had reached the public yet; it was just talk, rumours, gossip, raised eyebrows. You could be an internationalist, like Murray, believing in the rights of all peoples to govern themselves and in their duty to co-operate with other peoples—you could even get fired from the *Post-Dispatch* for holding and expressing views which did not fit in with the policy of the newspaper—but when you read of trouble in Canna, it hurt.

As Cyprus had hurt; and Kenya, Singapore, Malaya, Uganda, all the places where unrest had at some time or other threatened to disrupt orderly Government. When you believed, as Murray believed, that Whitehall was honestly waiting until conditions were ripe for self-government, this kind of thing hurt badly. It did a lot of harm, too. It gave Moscow red-hot propaganda, which spread to most parts of the world, and it gave the anti-British factions in the United States, on the continent of Europe and in most other countries, plenty to shout about. More: it made the genuine friends of the Commonwealth uneasy.

There were a lot of things that Murray knew and which were not known to the man in the street. He knew how often the men on the spot badly mishandled negotiations with local leaders; he knew how often sheer political stupidity had allowed a situation to get out of hand. He knew when the stiff-necked ineptitude of Whitehall was to blame for troubles, and he also knew when the chief cause of the troubles was political—when, for party advantage, one side or the other in the House took up an almost wicked attitude, or delayed action, or talked out of the backs of their necks, making fodder for the enemies of Britain.

He also knew that the situation on Canna had been almost ideal; better even than the Gold Coast, for the Cannan people had centuries of their own culture and their own tradition behind them. Canna had always been a willing partner in the Commonwealth. If there was trouble on the island, it was being stirred up from the outside.

Of that Murray felt sure.

Murray tossed a cigarette into the fireplace, and then opened the pages of *The Times.* With luck, there would be a more detailed story of the murder of the policeman in Canna. There was, but it did not really help him. It was not until he was at the end of the story that he had the clue for which he had been seeking since he had heard that the girl's name was Juanita Lang.

'. . . there is little doubt that the island's leader, Sir Meya Kamil, will share the horror which all the people of the island feel as a result of this cruel murder. Sir Meya has not yet commented on the situation, but his daughter, who is known to give unofficial voice to his views, has described it as "an unspeakable outrage".'

Meya Kamil, and his daughter—his family—his sister. So that was it. A sister of the greatest man in Canna had married Judge Lang, that was the thing which had teased Murray; so this girl was the great Meya Kamil's niece. He found himself seeing her in his mind's eye as she had turned her head to and fro desperately and said: *'I don't know where he is.'*

Was Meya Kamil missing? The newspapers gave no hint of it.

Why had Juanita been sent to England? Murray was folding the newspaper,

completely uninterested in other news, when he heard the subaltern approaching; the brisk walk made him feel sure that it was the youngster. He went out, and hid a grin at the salute and the crisp:

'Can you spare me a moment, sir?' 'Yes, of course.'

'There is a field telephone by the gate, sir, and Superintendent Miller of New Scotland Yard would like to speak to you.'

Murray echoed slowly: 'Miller,' and immediately had a mind picture of a very big, rather ungainly man, with a sandy moustache and thin sandy hair, and a look as if he had been dusted with flour; so 'Dusty' Miller. He had not seen Miller for years, and could not be said to be on the Yard's visiting list, but as he walked towards the gate and the field telephone, he was not marvelling at the thoroughness of the police and the military, but was trying to recall what he knew about Miller, and why it should be Miller, not one of the other Yard men whom he knew fairly well.

Miller, of course, was Special Branch.

Miller was a kind of Scotland Yard liaison officer with the security departments, especially with the Department for Home Security, known familiarly to many as Department Z.

Murray reached the field telephone, and took an instrument from a soldier who looked about sixteen, and told himself that the important thing was to keep an open mind.

7. Summons

‘Nigel Murray speaking,’ Murray said. ‘Did I get your name right? Superintendent Miller?’

‘That’s it,’ said Miller, and his voice had an unmistakable tone—it wasn’t quite Cockney and it wasn’t quite cultured. Miller was one of the most downright and matter- of-fact men whom Murray had ever met. ‘You’ve been having a bit of trouble down there, I understand.’

‘A little trouble and a lot of mystery.’

‘Just up your street,’ said Miller. He was also a humourless man or that was his reputation. A spade was a spade, and he saw nothing funny in calling it a bloody shovel. ‘Well, I was talking to the *Post-Dispatch* just now; thought you were still on the staff. Who are you with now?

‘No one.’

‘Free-lancing?’

‘I’m what is known in some circles as resting.’

‘Like that, is it?’ said Miller, as if pleased, and then went on with hardly a pause: ‘Well, we don’t want anything of the trouble down in Dorset to reach the newspapers—don’t want anyone named, especially. I’m told you haven’t been out of the cottage since the police arrived.’

‘With the army.’

‘Hm, yes,’ said Miller. ‘I was told they’d taken over; give them half a chance for a bit of practice, and they turn it into full-scale manoeuvres. Well, listen. I’d like to have a talk with you up here. Any objection to coming up right away?’

‘I suppose not,’ Murray said.

‘What’s the reservation?’

‘I’m not sure that I want to leave Juani . . .’

‘The *girl*’ Miller almost shouted. ‘No name!’

‘Oh. Sorry.’ This was hush-hush with a vengeance, and Murray realised that in spite of everything that had happened, he hadn’t begun to grasp all the essentials; the sense of unreality with him since the first moment of waking was still very marked. And he was tired; he doubted whether he had had two hours’ sleep during the night. ‘Anyway, I’m not sure that I want to leave her with the people down here,’ he added. ‘They seem to regard her as a freak, and. . .’

‘Well, she is a freak, in a way,’ Miller declared; ‘like people who have quads, if you know what I mean. You needn’t worry about that, though; someone’s on the way to take care of her. A Mrs. Wyatt, who should be there soon, she’s flying down. She’ll have a friend with her— chap named Oundle. They’ll have proper credentials, and. they’ll take over. The girl will be all right with them, you needn’t worry.’

‘All right,’ Murray gave in. ‘When do you want me?’

‘Well, why not come up on the plane that’s bringing Mrs. Wyatt and Oundle?’ asked Miller; ‘be up in no time, that way.’

‘Suits me,’ Murray agreed again. When the Yard commanded. . .

‘Ta,’ said Miller, and then added heavily: ‘Don’t try to get in touch with any newspapers, will you?’

‘You’re not giving me much chance,’ Murray said dryly.

He rang off, put the receiver down slowly, then took out his cigarettes. His case

was empty. The subaltern produced a full one, and insisted. Murray lit up. 'Thanks,' he said. 'Apparently I have to go to London.' He walked slowly and thoughtfully towards the cottage, which looked very small and solid from the road. It was made of Purbeck stone, and was two hundred years old, little more than a box of granite with a slate roof. But for the garden and the position, it would have looked ugly, but somehow it fitted in with the landscape. He saw the window of his bedroom, and wondered whether Juanita Lang was asleep, or whether she would soon get restless and want to be up.

The constable, Bob, was coming out of the cottage carrying a photograph, which he tucked away into his tunic pocket.

'You'll be glad to know that identification has been established, sir.'

'The lady didn't lie.'

'No, sir,' the constable said. 'Very truthful young lady, sir.'

Murray smiled faintly, and stood aside for the subaltern, whose name he didn't know. A Reginald, perhaps, or a Lionel? A mother's pride, no doubt; and in his honest way, England's pride, too.

'That just about covers everything,' Murray said, 'except that no one told me the result of the poison-gas squad's investigation.'

The other smiled.

'Haven't had the report myself yet, sir,' he declared, and Murray wondered if he was a liar in a good cause.

Murray went quietly upstairs. The bedroom door was closed, and he tapped very lightly, but there was no response. He needed some clothes if he was to go to London, but he didn't want to disturb Juanita. He tapped again, and then opened the door and peeped in. He could see her snuggled down, golden hair spread over her pillow, one arm hanging over the side of the bed, bared from the elbow because the wide pyjama sleeve was rucked up.

He saw the dark bruises.

They always made him angry.

Forget the bruises, and she was like a child, a lovely child. He'd seen a picture something like her, in an old magazine; not long ago, either. A magazine which had ceased to appear years ago, associated with—ah, yes. Soap. *Bubbles.* And there'd been a popular song, *I'm for ever blowing bubbles.* She reminded him of the curly-haired boy in the picture, who was the artist? Millais, that was it. At least his mind was working. He opened the door wider and crept in, but didn't disturb her. His clothes were in a small wardrobe, not close to the bed, and his shoes, a clean shirt, collar and tie were there, too. He collected everything very carefully, and when he tip-toed out, the girl hadn't stirred. The door closed with more of a click than he wanted, but she didn't call out, and he hoped that he hadn't disturbed her.

He had a shave, and dressed; and was knotting his tie when he heard the sound of an aeroplane—probably something very small, more like a training aircraft than anything else. He looked out of the kitchen window, and saw the khaki-clad guards peering up, too. Hovering not far above their heads was a helicopter, obviously preparing to land in the meadow next to the cottage.

Murray went out and watched it.

Three people got out: a youngster who was obviously the pilot, a man of about forty who looked remarkably thin and who, even at a distance, appeared to have enormous eyes, and a woman, probably in the middle thirties. She wore a short leopard-skin coat, and a pale brown suit which just missed being khaki, and a small

hat trimmed with the same fur as her coat. Money, walking. She walked across the uneven meadowland smoothly, with the spindly man, presumably Oundle, holding her elbow, but obviously she didn't need his help. A soldier waited for them at the fence, and Oundle helped the woman over, but again she looked quite capable of managing without help. She was tall, slim, and wholesome-looking, and there probably wasn't a better complexion in England. She had a rather full, nice mouth, and looked as if she didn't smile often, but there was a calmness about her which one couldn't mistake; a kind of serenity.

The subaltern, still in charge, came hurrying.

'Mrs. Wyatt and Mr. Oundle?'

'That's right, old chap,' said the spindly man, and flipped a card out of his pocket. 'Identification and all that nonsense.' He let the youngster read, and then tucked the card back. 'Where's the patient?'

He was looking inquiringly at Murray.

The subaltern introduced them, formally.

'I gather the lassie chose your home to take cover in,' said Oundle, 'and you seem to have done quite a job. Congratulations and apologies for the nuisance we're being.'

Murray said: 'The main thing is that it works out all right.' He looked at Mrs. Wyatt, and at close quarters liked what he saw even more than he had at a distance. 'You're to look after Miss—or mustn't I mention names?'

'Oh, between friends,' said Oundle, and then spread his large, bony hands, 'let's be safe, shall we? Call her the lass, miss, thingummy, what's-her-name, or even little girlie.'

'Ned, don't be a fool,' said Mrs. Wyatt, and a smile showed in her grey eyes. 'How is she, Mr. Murray?'

'Surprisingly well, I think.' Murray glanced at the cottage and, beyond it, saw a speck in the sky announcing another aeroplane, but didn't give that a second thought. 'She was asleep twenty minutes ago, after having some eggs and toast.'

'A cook, too,' Oundle marvelled.

'How long was she in the water?' asked Mrs. Wyatt.

'At a guess, twenty minutes,' Murray told her, 'but a lot of things were happening, and I don't know when she actually fell in. I think she'll be all right.'

'Safe to move her, then?'

'Good lord, yes!'

'That's fine,' said Mrs. Wyatt.

She glanced up at the aeroplane, which was not far away now, flying very low, and making a lot of noise. It was a old *Spitfire,* but its R.A.F. markings weren't there, like hundreds of others it had been sold to private owners, all too often for scrap. It so happened that this one was directly in line with the cottage and with a little group approaching the front door, and it seemed to be swooping lower than before.

Then Oundle said: '*Look*!' in a shocked voice, and as he uttered the word, he began to run. Murray stood back stock still. Mrs. Wyatt stared up at the aircraft, and the subaltern, behind them now, called out something which the din of the engine drowned.

Oundle was almost at the open front door of the cottage.

Then, Murray—baffled until that moment—saw 'it'.

A ball about the size of a football was swaying about beneath the aircraft, and as

the nose drew almost level with the cottage, the ball fell. It had only ten yards to go. Then the aircraft roared over the slate roof, making Murray duck involuntarily. He heard another cry, as of horror—and then he heard a strange sound, the spitting snarl of a Bren gun.

All of this happened so fast that he hardly had time to think—and yet he had a sense of disaster. Oundle flung himself inside the house, and the subaltern, running desperately, was only three yards behind.

Then the ball hit the side of the house, and exploded.

Murray *saw* it.

First, the wall split open and great pieces of stone flew from it, there was a roar, then a smaller ball which looked red hot, and spread into a vast sheet of flame. It seemed to hide the whole of the roof. As the horror registered on his mind, Murray felt the blast surge over him, powerful enough to make him lose his balance. He banged into Mrs. Wyatt, and they fell, hugging each other. The echo of the explosion was almost deafening in Murray's ears, and yet the other sound came through it. *Bk-bk-bk-bk-bk.* There were other noises, as of men shouting, engines starting, and a cry which had a strange note in it, almost one of exultation.

Murray staggered to his feet.

Mrs. Wyatt was up first, and she began to run towards the cottage. A corner of it was already blazing furiously.

'God, *no*!' breathed Murray.

He overtook the woman, and was almost level with the subaltern. He caught a glimpse of the youth, lying on his back. The sight was hideous, for a piece of the 'ball' had caught him in the forehead. From the bridge of the nose downwards he hadn't a mark, but above it...

Mother's *pride.*

Murray jumped over him.

He heard a different note in the engine of the Spitfire, but didn't think about it; all he could think about was Juanita Lang. The bomb had struck that corner of the house where she lay, where she had been asleep, and already the roof was on fire and part of it had fallen, and there was that gaping hole in the wall.

He saw the man Oundle, at the top of the stairs.

'Turn right!' Murray bellowed.

Oundle seemed to work on his reflexes alone, and he swung towards the door on the right and thrust it open. Murray saw him vanish—and then saw him appear again, his hand up in front of his face, as if he was keeping something off. Murray felt a despair which made him groan: *'No,* no.' He was almost at the top when Oundle seemed to gather his strength and plunge into the room again.

Murray reached the landing.

The room seemed to be a mass of flames, but the bed was away from the window and the great hole in the wall.

Juanita Lang lay quite still, and on her pillow was a big piece of granite from the blasted wall. The head of the bed was smashed.

8. Disaster

Murray realised almost subconsciously what had happened when Oundle had opened the door; the draught had brought the flames shooting across, and the carpet was already blazing; so was the dressing-gown hanging behind the door, and so were the clothes at the foot of the bed. But the bed itself had not been in a direct line between the gaping hole and the door, and the flames hadn't yet taken a hold.

Oundle reached the girl.

Murray couldn't see any blood, or any sign that her head was crushed; but the sight of the rock affected him much as the sight of the 'ball' had affected Oundle. The stink of smoke was so powerful that he began to cough, but the girl lay completely oblivious, peaceful, and—asleep?

'Windows,' Oundle gasped. 'Hur-ry.'

He picked Juanita up, bedclothes and all, and the foot of the top blanket burst into bright flame. Murray snatched at it, stung his fingers, but got it free and tossed it behind him. He reached the window ahead of Oundle, ready to fling it up. But if he drew the flame this way one searing blast might be too much for them all.

He began to open it, slowly.

Oundle stood close to him, and behind them the fire raged and the way to the door was already cut off.

The window stuck.

Murray pushed it harder; it opened with a jerk and he felt a blast of hot air. He clenched his teeth against the coming of panic, and began to climb out. There was Oundle, with the girl in his arms, her lead lolling on his shoulder in a mass of fluffy gold. Murray climbed out backwards, just as he had done during the night, and this time with a speed that could never be fast enough. He hung at arm's length a moment, then dropped; and as he fell, he remembered his twisted ankle, and tried to get the weight on to his left foot.

He did.

He swayed, but straightened up and turned round in the same movement. As he did so, he caught sight of several little dark men—like those who had been by the well. One was hurrying, two lay still on the ground—and one had a gaping hole in his head.

So they had come under cover of the bombing.

Murray stretched his arms upwards.

Oundle was already lowering Juanita, while a flame spat out above his head. Now the girl was half-way out of the room. The blankets dragged behind her, the pyjama trousers rucked up beyond her knees; her feet and legs had a golden colour which might be tan and might be a touch of Cannan blood.

'Coming!' Oundle called. He seemed to choke.

'I've got her!'

'Take the strain,' called Oundle. It was like a scream.

Murray gripped Juanita's legs, and then let her slide down, holding her all the time until he was able to hug her close to him, and make sure that she didn't fall. He staggered away from the wall, catching a glimpse of Oundle climbing out, as he did so; and above Oundle there seemed to be nothing but a mass of flames.

Soldiers appeared, stretching up their eager hands to help. A dark man who had come from the well stopped, and watched Murray. Fool. Then Murray heard Mrs. Wyatt's quiet voice, saying:

'I've sent for the army doctor; he'll be here in a moment.' Her voice and her manner were strangely calming, and she had lost none of her serenity. 'Put her down on that seat.'

'That seat' was a rustic bench, facing the well, and it was amply wide enough. Murray staggered to it, and two soldiers helped him. Mrs. Wyatt had turned away, and Murray straightened up, grunting, and lifting his right foot from the ground; he hadn't put all his weight on it, but hadn't done it any good.

He saw the soldiers carrying Oundle away, saw Mrs. Wyatt approach the spindly man—and realised that Oundle's hair had been burnt right off, that his face and hands looked raw.

Oh, God!

This was horror upon horror.

And—Juanita?

'It's all right,' the doctor said quietly; 'she came out of it well, anyhow. Just knocked out. Might be a bit of concussion, but no real harm done. Wish I could say the same about the others.'

He was standing by the side of the rustic bench. Mrs. Wyatt was sitting at one end. Except that her hair was untidy—dark hair but showing glinting gold lights as the sun shone upon her—she hadn't been touched by the explosion or the fire. Murray was vaguely aware that the fingers of his left hand were sore, and there was a small burn on the back of his right hand; he didn't know that his hair, eyebrows and lashes had been singed, but not enough to hurt.

An ambulance was already moving off, with Oundle in it; the army unit hadn't lost a moment.

'How many hurt?' asked Murray gruffly.

'Four dead—a C.I.D. man, Lieutenant Soames, Lance-corporal Downey, and a private whose name I don't know,' the doctor said. He wasn't much older than the lieutenant whose name Murray had learned only after death. 'Two badly injured—all guards near the house, of course. Hell of a business.' He was bleak and almost hostile as he looked past Murray towards the empty sky. 'At least we got the swine.'

'Oh?'

'Didn't you know?'

'Know what?'

'We captured one of three men who tried to reach the house, and two were killed,' Mrs. Wyatt said. 'And the Bren-gun crew brought the Spitfire down.'

So that was the explanation of the second plume of smoke, and it was something to be glad about. Murray could picture the scene as the Spitfire came swooping, while he had wondered why it was flying so low; and then Oundle, the man he had known only for a few moments, had cried: *'Look'* and started to run. If he hadn't done that, the girl would be dead.

How badly was Oundle hurt? With burns like that, would he ever see again? And could the surgeons help him to be anything but a freak? *Freak.* Miller of the Yard had said that Juanita was a freak, in a kind of way. Was it freakish to be within the clutch of death twice in less than twelve hours, and to escape each time?

Was it freakish to be in such danger?

Murray kept staring down at Juanita, remembering what had happened since he had first seen her, remembering what he knew about her, about Judge Lang, about her uncle Sir Meya Kamil, about Canna. His thoughts were hopelessly mixed up, but through them all was the cause for the savage anger which possessed him now.

'What's it all about?' he asked roughly. 'Do you know?' He glared at Mrs. Wyatt as she put a salve on his burns and then gave him a finger-stall. 'Do you? Why the hell do they want to kill her? What makes them prepared to kill anyone who tries to help her?'

Mrs. Wyatt said, very quietly: 'I don't know what it's about, but I do know that when you reach London you'll be told much more than you know yet.'

So she knew he was to go to London.

'I'm not so sure I'm going,' he said savagely. 'How do I know that she'll be all right? I seem to be her lucky star. If I leave her. . .'

'We'll look after her,' Mrs. Wyatt said; 'we'll make quite sure that nothing else happens to her. But they need your help in London; they wouldn't have sent for you if they didn't.'

'Who wants my help?' Murray was still angry and aggressive.

'I was told that I could tell you, if you asked,' said Mrs. Wyatt. They were alone, now, except for Juanita, who was still lying unconscious, and looking as if she was asleep. 'It's Department Z. Craigie's department.'

Of course, he should have guessed, because of Miller; but the assurance sobered him, making him realise that whatever else, this wasn't being taken lightly. Lightly! He was almost out of his mind. Every organisation in the country had been warned to look out for the girl, as soon as she had been found she had been surrounded by guards, it had been treated as a major military operation; and yet it hadn't been possible to stave off attack, it was more luck than judgment that Juanita was still alive.

And courage; like Oundle's courage.

If he'd been a yard ahead of Oundle in that room, he would have lifted the girl from the bed, he would have waited, as Oundle had, holding the girl out of the window and dropping her into succouring arms—and he would have been burned as Oundle had been.

Murray said, in a calmer voice: 'I think I need a drink."

'There's one in the helicopter,' Mrs. Wyatt said, and as she spoke the pilot of the machine came towards them, with one of the men in ordinary clothes who had been searching near the well—Dorset C.I.D. men—and behind these in turn four brisk-moving soldiers who obviously knew exactly what they were about.

'Here's my guard, and Juanita's,' Mrs. Wyatt said. 'Won't you get away as quickly as you can?'

Murray hadn't really any choice.

The flight didn't take long, and neither Murray nor the pilot said very much. The pilot was an older man than he had seemed at first sight, and he handled the controls as smoothly and naturally as the man in the street would drive a motor car.

'We land in St. James's Park,' he said, as they flew over London's outskirts, and Murray looked down upon the spires of the churches, and saw St. Paul's and the winding river, Tower Bridge, the Houses of Parliament—all the landmarks which

made this home. ‘Special dispensation, but I’ll have to mind the ducks. Er—we’ll be met. Miller, probably. Then off you go to see the great man.’

‘Who?’

‘Gordon Craigie,’ the pilot said patiently. ‘Jane told you, didn’t she?’

‘Who told me what?’ asked Murray obtusely.

‘Mind’s not on the job,’ said the pilot mildly. ‘Jane— that’s Jane Wyatt. She told you—that’s you, Nigel Murray, ex *Post-Dispatch*—that you’re to see the big shot of Department Z. That’s Craigie. I refuse to believe that a foreign correspondent of such renown doesn’t know that Department Z is one of the home security organisations. Some say one, others say *the* one. I’m one of the others.’

He wasn’t really fatuous, and wasn’t talking for the sake of it. Murray realised that, and he also realised that this man was one of Craigie’s agents; as Oundle was. Oundle had talked in very much the same way, flippantly, almost as if it was deliberate intention not to take anything too seriously. The reputation of Craigie’s agents in Department Z was that, for better or worse, they were trained to behave like this—using a kind of defensive shield. It was a long time since Murray had heard much about them, but he didn’t need a refresher course. For instance, the casualty lists in the Department were appalling. He had heard it said that a man who served as an agent had one chance in two of living five years, one chance in three of living seven.

‘Is Jane Wyatt one of—you?’ Murray asked.

‘Good half-question. She’s nearly two of us. God bless Jane. I would have you know,’ went on the pilot, ‘that I have been instructed to acquaint you with as much background knowledge as I can, once you evinced curiosity. You took a long time about it. Jane Wyatt was married to Gerald Wyatt; one of our better bigger boys. He was killed two years ago; nasty job in a burning house. And Jane—well, Jane’s part of the fabric of the place now, so to speak.’

Murray said: ‘I see.’

She had kept so calm, in face of the fire.

They were circling over St. James’s Park now, and he saw St. James’s Palace, the grey-white buildings of Whitehall and, as the helicopter swung round, Buckingham Palace, Clarence House, Trafalgar Square, the great sprawling mass of London all about it, and the Parks which looked as if they had been painted on the smoky greyness. In the great courtyard of St. James’s Palace, where so many ceremonials added to London’s history, was a little group of men. The courtyard was cordoned off, with at least a hundred soldiers at attention.

The pilot made for this.

‘Going down,’ he said, as they began to hover. ‘Just gulp if you have funny sensations in your ears. The crowd probably think the Duke of E.’s having a joy ride. Er—before we land, one other thing. Craigie’s a great believer in props, you know.’

‘Props?’

‘Gadgets. Secret doors, hidden bells, simple or obscure codes, passwords—he believes in the whole box of tricks. I used to disagree with him, thought it was all juvenile *hocus pocus,* but when you’ve seen it work, you rather get to like it. Don’t be put off.’

‘Thanks.’

‘Here we go,’ said the pilot. ‘Mind the step.’

A closed car, with a driver and one passenger, was waiting inside the cordon. Before Murray could really be observed by two or three hundred people surrounding the soldiers, he was inside the car. The passenger was burly Superintendent Miller, who grunted a greeting, and looked out of the window as if he wondered whether they were being followed, after all; or being watched as a line of police forced a path for his car. When he appeared to be satisfied that there was nothing to worry about, he relaxed and turned to Murray.

'Only just round the corner,' he declared; 'we won't be long. Mind playing a silly game?' He sounded as if he meant exactly that—there was none of the flippancy of the pilot in his expression or his words. 'Craigie insists on it, these days —thought it up about six months ago.'

Murray said: 'I'm beginning to wonder if this is a new kind of lunacy.'

'Lunacy,' echoed Miller, and smoothed his dusty-looking moustache. 'Gaw, of course it is. Life is, isn't it? Ever read a newspaper and *think*? Gives you the creeps. Take this morning. Just had the year's figures for road accidents; nearly six thousand people on the roads last year, over one in five of them kids. Slaughter's another word for murder—and it goes on and on. Ain't that lunacy? And look at the things that happen abroad. And look—anyway, Craigie's the boss, so you have to. Put it on, will you, and don't make a fuss.'

'What . . . ?' began Murray, and he saw 'it'—a small black mask, with no holes for the eyes.

He put it on; the elastic kept it close to his head.

He did not know in what part of the district they stopped, but the journey took about ten minutes. He was helped out of the car, helpless as a blind man would be, and then he walked across a pavement, heard a lot of traffic including buses moving very fast, and then heard a door open, with a slight creak. Next moment there was the echo of his own and Miller's footsteps which proved that they were somewhere inside a building probably with bare walls.

'Step up,' Miller said.

Murray obeyed, and climbed a flight of steps cautiously, and then another. Here Miller stopped, and after a moment's pause, he said:

'Okay, take it off.'

Murray took the mask and handed it back. He blinked in a poor light which seemed bright after the darkness. About him were blank walls, painted a drab green, and there was a hand-rail which ran all the way round the little square landing where they stood. There was no door, nothing to suggest that this led to anywhere but the next flight of stairs.

'Do you hand me over to Craigie here?' he asked, and in spite of what he had been told by the pilot and what he knew, he began to feel a sharp sense of exasperation; this was simply play acting. They were grown men, and . . .

The wall in front of him began to slide open. Miller didn't seem even slightly surprised, and as the section stopped moving, he led the way forward. They seemed to be inside a thick wall, for there was another facing them— and the sliding panel behind them slid to, enclosing them, as if they were being walled up. But then a section of the wall in front began to move, and Miller said:

'Here we are.'

He stepped into a long, spacious room. At first sight there was little remarkable about it, for at the far end there were desks, filing cabinets, cupboards and chairs, all of drab green steel. There were at least a dozen telephones, a dictaphone on its

stand, and several other oddments.

There were no windows, yet the light seemed like that of a bright but rather cloudy day.

As they stepped into the room, Miller looked round towards the right; and there was a different scene. A fireplace, with a bright fire blazing, several armchairs pulled up in a semi-circle, a corner cupboard the door of which was ajar, and from which there poked the end of a navy-blue tie. The huge mantelpiece was of beautifully carved, light brown oak. On the wall was a rack with several meerschaums in it, there were small tables—everything one might expect to find in a bachelor's flat.

In one armchair was an elderly, grey-haired man with a hatchet face—a face which immediately made Murray think of a North American Indian; the lips curved and the face was so deeply lined that one could picture him sitting cross-legged in front of his wickiac, smoking as he was smoking a meerschaum now—and occasionally removing the pipe and saying:

'How.'

He had very clear grey eyes.

Standing up and moving rather awkwardly as he did so, was another, much larger man, ungainly, and with a mop of untidy hair which had once been dark brown, and was now streaked with grey. His brown suit wanted pressing, and the buttons of the waistcoat were undone, as if he was getting fatter and it would no longer fasten with comfort.

'Hallo, there,' this man said, and smiled faintly; that made him even more homely, and rather better-looking. 'Sorry we've had to wish this on you, Murray. I'm Loftus, and this is Gordon Craigie.'

Now Craigie stood up, a neat man and almost dapper in grey—a figure whom Murray knew was almost legendary and who, in some indefinable way, created an impression of greatness as he held out his right hand.

9. Craigie and Loftus

Murray felt the firm grip of Craigie's hand; then the power in Loftus's grip. He had nearly forgotten Miller, who shook hands with each man, then sat down in one of the easy chairs and pulled out a pipe, large by ordinary standards but dwarfed by Craigie's. Loftus pushed a chair a little closer to the fire and said: 'Take a pew,' as casually as if this was a little social occasion, and then he asked: 'What would you like? Beer, any of the hard stuff, or . . .'

'Beer. Thanks.' Play-acting?

'Pale or dark?'

'Bitter.'

'Fine,' said Loftus, and went to the cupboard. He took out three bottles of beer, one of gin and an Italian vermouth, and then brought out a glass, two pewter and one silver tankards. Expertly, and certainly as well as any barman, he took the screw tops off the bottles and filled the tankards; the silver one for Murray, the others for himself and Miller. Then he put the gin and Italian close to Craigie's side, and dropped into a huge armchair. It creaked. He picked up his tankard, raised it high, blew at imaginary froth, and said:

'May you never be blindfolded again. Here's health.'

'Ah,' said Miller, and they both quaffed.

Murray found himself smiling faintly, but that wasn't the important thing. Craigie was. Craigie sat there pouring himself a drink, and Murray found it hard to think of either of the others. There was that aura of greatness, almost a kind of mesmerism. Murray had met men with it before, and knew that it manifested itself on the first moment of meeting. There were few men alive today who had it, but some of the great dictators undoubtedly had the quality. Peron, at one stage in his life. Gandhi had, too. Oh, there were dozens, and he had learned to recognise it quickly; he had no doubt that he was in the presence of a kind of greatness.

'We owe you a little explanation first,' Craigie said quietly. 'We were told that Miss Lang was on her way to England, but not until it was too late to meet her at the airport. We sent men to her aunt's house in Hampstead—but she didn't arrive. One of our men on the way to the house saw her being forced to get into a taxi. He followed her, but couldn't get word to us. We now know that he was at Cliff House, and his body was found near the cottage. He . . .'

'That would be the man at the corner,' Murray said heavily. 'Well, I think he saved Juanita's life.'

'That's a good thing to hear,' Cragie said quietly, and went on: 'I wonder if you'll tell us exactly what happened, and what Miss Lang's told you,' he said. 'Go through it from the beginning, will you?'

'Everything?'

'Please.'

'By everything,' put in Loftus, 'we mean your reactions as well as Miss Lang's.'

'Of course,' said Craigie. 'We know exactly how you reacted when the policeman came back to the cottage with the postman this morning, and we know what you did when the bomb dropped. But we'd like everything in your own words.' He sipped his drink again, and then went on: 'You can be quite sure that Miss Lang isn't in danger at the moment; at least we've gained some time. Or you could say that you've

gained it.'

Murray hesitated for a few moments. Then he said:

'Perhaps I'd better start a little before the shooting last night. For instance, why I was at the cottage . . .'

He began to talk very quietly; as if he had been commanded and there was no option but to obey.

Loftus and Craigie, in their respective chairs, and Miller who sat on the other side of Murray, listened to the newspaper correspondent as he talked so easily and without any kind of histrionics or, as far as they could judge, without any kind of exaggeration. He was a professional reporter, and he was reporting; and as he talked it was easy to understand the reputation which he had won for himself with his dispatches to the *Post-Dispatch.*

Loftus particularly liked his opening sentences.

'For instance, why was I at the cottage at all?' Murray said, and his lips curved slightly, giving him a droll look. 'I'd been fired from the *Post-Dispatch.* The editorial policy is the Empire Right or Wrong, as you know, and for a long time they've been cutting odd sentences and sometimes whole paragraphs out of my dispatches—bits which I thought were essential to give a true picture of the whole story. Patriotism's an absolute, in its way, but sometimes it's truer patriotism to admit a fault than to pretend one doesn't exist. Do you want any examples?'

'No, thanks,' Craigie said dryly; 'we know what you mean.'

'Thanks. Well, I came home from the West Indies last week. Two or three more recent dispatches had been cut about badly, and I told the Editor I didn't like it. He said I would have to lump it. I said that I would report what I saw and not what he or anyone else wanted to see and I sent in two more. As a result, he fired me.'

Murray was still smiling faintly.

'Reports on what?' asked Craigie.

'Living conditions in parts of the West Indies.'

'Hmm, yes; go on,' said Craigie.

'Well, contrary to a lot of people's ideas, foreign correspondents do not make a fortune, and I'm no exception,' Murray said. 'What's more, I'd had a bad time, financially. I—er—was divorced two years ago, and one way and the other—want details?'

'No,' said Craigie. He didn't add that he had them. Murray's wife had gone to live with another man, and he had given her a divorce.

'Thanks,' Murray said, with his droll smile.

He went on to tell them that the far-famed Abbotts— husband and wife collaborators in light-hearted farces for the West End stage—had let him the cottage for the winter, as he had expected to be in England for some time. He had known the Abbotts slightly even before that. They had just put on a wild farce, at the Glory Theatre in the West End, called *Penny Coloured—a* semi-musical with a huge cast of Jamaican and other coloured actors and actresses, and they expected the show to have a long run.

Murray had wanted a few weeks, perhaps a few months, of quiet and general reflection, particularly after he had been fired. He had sufficient money, and he had been abroad for over six years, with only occasional breaks in England Much of the time he had been in danger areas, such as Korea, Kenya, Indo-China, Morocco, and Cyprus—where he had first met the Abbotts, when they had been touring

military camps in the Middle East. In casual-sounding sentences he explained that the divorce had come about because he had been away so much.

'So I went down to the cottage four days ago,' Murray said. 'It's a long way from anywhere—that's why the Abbotts bought it, together with Cliff House, a couple of years ago. They can bury themselves if they want to. In the winter they usually let the big house furnished when they can, and leave the cottage *if* they can. I think I'm the first tenant. Anyhow, until about half-past two this morning it was as normal as it could be. Then . . .'

Craigie watched him closely, and studied the alert, intelligent face, the fine honey-coloured eyes, the sensitive lips. It was easy to believe that Murray was a man of great understanding, of great compassion and of tolerance. Certainly, he was a humanitarian. If at times that made him sound cynical, it did not mean that he was truly cynical; but a lot of things hurt.

He had a deep, pleasant voice, and formed his words very carefully. Only now and again did a hint of the Scottish burr creep in, and that usually when he used the double-r.

Craigie and Loftus had been studying reports on him for some hours. They were reports which had been obtained from the *Post-Dispatch* and from the Army, Naval and Air Force intelligence departments which had all screened Murray before he had been allowed to go to certain fields of military operations. Few men's lives could have been more thoroughly investigated, and few came out with a cleaner sheet. There was even more. On three occasions he had been screened by United States intelligence officers, once when he had been on an atomic research reporting mission in Nevada. The Federal Bureau of Investigation had passed him without question.

Murray, then, was a safe risk.

The way he told his story made that seem even more obvious. The courage of what he had done was glossed over, and he was almost apologetic whenever he talked of himself. He should have got down that well quicker, for instance. By the time he had finished, Miller was looking at him obviously with a new respect. Miller had the profile view—Murray's nose was rather long, almost Roman, and he had a good, bony chin.

At last, he finished.

Loftus rubbed his upper lip, then drained his tankard and looked round towards the cupboard as if he wished that another bottle of beer was handy; but it was out of reach and he didn't get up. Murray drank a little more of his beer; he still had half a tankard.

'What conclusions have you reached?' Craigie asked, as if curiously.

'I know what I think this is all about, but I'd need a lot more information before I attempted to reach any conclusion,' Murray said. 'There's an attempt to disrupt the situation in Canna, of course. I've heard the rumours. Meya Kamil is absolutely pro-British, and the island is in a key position—both strategically and politically,' he added thoughtfully. 'While it remains absolutely loyal to us, we've a strong hand in the Middle East and in Africa. If it turned into another Cyprus, and if rebels could work up popular agitation against us—well, it wouldn't be good. In Cyprus we had a strong military reason for wanting absolute control, but here it's not such a strong case outwardly, anyhow.'

'That's right, soft pedal,' Loftus said. 'The strategic importance of Canna is pretty big, though. It's really the bung in the hole, Murray. If Canna was pulled out of the

Commonwealth, a lot of very good liquor would spill out.'

Murray said: 'Yes, I know.'

Undoubtedly Craigie was assessing him, and undoubtedly he affected Murray more than Loftus. Murray had his own storehouse of knowledge, too, and his own beliefs. It was one thing to say that Britain needed the colonies for political and economic reasons; but it was another, and one seldom voiced, to say that the colonies needed Britain.

Many colonies did.

Murray had no illusions about these things. Take away the guiding, the restraining, and the governing hand of Britain, and in some cases disaster would follow in a frighteningly short time.

And many peoples were being fed far too early with fodder for nationalism.

Craigie knew this better than he did.

Now, Craigie asked:

'What else did Juanita Lang tell you?'

'Nothing. The important things, as far as I could judge, were that she'd been living in Canna with Meya Kamil, that he disappeared, that she was kidnapped and was then asked to tell her kidnappers where Meya Kamil was. They gave her a taste of torture, I think. Her wrists are badly bruised.'

'Think she knows where her uncle is?' asked Craigie, softly.

With that question, the tension seemed to rise in the office. Obviously it was a key one, and was vital.

'No,' Murray said, and hesitated, and then asked: 'Don't you know?'

'No,' said Craigie, with great precision. 'Meya Kamil disappeared nearly a week ago. Just before he went, we found unassailable evidence that there is an island-wide plot to overthrow the present government, and to undermine British influence and British rule. A dictatorship is to be set up. It's been developing for some time. We've known that, and our Middle East agents and some of the other Intelligence Departments have been working on it, but no one knew how extensive it was. Probably no one knows that yet, but'—Craigie glanced towards the steel cabinets, and then back at Murray—'we have a fair idea. They've planned a short, violent, and deadly campaign. There are many secret stores of arms all over the island. They're going to find a martyr, too—and the islanders look on Meya Kamil almost as a god. I expect you know that.'

Murray nodded, without speaking; and he looked as if he could see beyond, to what Craigie was going to add.

'They call Meya Kamil the Good Man,' Craigie went on almost pedantically, 'and there's no doubt that to most of the islanders he's the positive symbol of goodness. That really began about twenty years ago, when there was an earthquake whick destroyed several villages and damaged three towns really badly. Meya Kamil organised relief and performed some amazing acts of courage.'

'I remember reading about it,' Murray said. 'Wasn't there something about spiders which are deadly to human beings, but which didn't harm him?'

'You probably know almost as much as we do,' said Craigie. 'Yes. There's a species of black spider on the island with a poisonous bite fatal to most people and animals. They're in the mountainous regions in the south-west —where the earthquake struck. The earthquake split one of the mountains, and disturbed great swarms of spiders living there—partly underground. They invaded a village, several people were bitten and killed, and there was panic. Meya Kamil took a locust spray

and walked into the spiders, killing thousands—and although he was bitten, he didn't suffer. There's a medical explanation, of course, but to the simple people of Canna it seemed as if he was under divine protection. He was always popular; this made him worshipped. And with Judge Lang, he obtained many concessions for the island.

'Whitehall knew his power—and encouraged him, for he was always pro-British. As an earnest of readiness to put government into the hands of the colonial people, Meya Kamil was made Governor, and the island is virtually self- governed—its House of Representatives is ninety per cent native. Lang had always campaigned for that.' Craigie paused, and then added as if casually: 'Did you know that Judge Lang married Meya Kamil's sister?'

Murray nodded.

'The history of the island is one of almost uninterrupted friendliness towards Great Britain,' Craigie went on, in the same pedantic way. 'It's a poor island, barren in many places, but the people are industrious, and with some British financial aid they get along comfortably. It isn't the paradise that Meya Kamil and Judge Lang claimed, it's far too poor; but until recently the people have been contented, and their conditions are much better than in most Arab states on the mainland. There has been the odd hostile politician, of course, one or two communists, one or two extreme nationalists who wanted to break away from Britain and win complete independence, or join forces with the Arabs. But until a few weeks ago these men had no real influence. Recently, their influence has been getting much stronger at an alarming rate, and it could very easily become dangerous, because . . .'

Craigie paused again, watching Murray closely.

Murray seemed to be intensely interested, but not really surprised. A newspaperman in his position would probably be among the few people who had reason to hear rumours of discontent and talk of rebellion in Canna.

Loftus had his great hands folded across his stomach, and his eyes were narrowed. Miller hadn't moved.

Craigie moved now, took a photograph out of a drawer, and handed it to Murray. It was a picture of Meya Kamil, a photograph taken by a man with a touch of genius.

The man's 'goodness' seemed to show as part of the portrait. Here was a saint. The gentle expression, the soft features, the patient eyes set deeply, all pointed to that.

Murray handed the photograph back.

'It could become dangerous because a whispering campaign had been started among the islanders,' went on Craigie at last. 'It claims that we intend to displace Meya Kamil, as we displaced the Kabaka of Buganda not long ago, and as we've displaced other colonial leaders, like Seretse Khama and Archbishop Makarios. The trouble is that although we are apt to forget such differences after they've been settled, the Asian mind is far less forgetful. Asians have long memories—and often very good reasons for it, they've had too many raw deals. This rumour that we intend to displace Meya Kamil is becoming so strong that it's disaffecting Cannan leaders who have always been pro-British. So—well, I needn't go on,' finished Craigie abruptly. 'Our job's self-evident. We have to reassure the islanders. Until we find Meya Kamil, we can't. And if we don't find him soon. I think the island will be in a state of uproar, and it may well lead to one of the ugliest situations we've faced as a nation, one that could be the beginning of the end of Colonial rule and of British

influence in Africa and Asia. Canna is a model colony, the best we have, the best that we can do. If that breaks away . . .'

Craigie stopped.

'You really don't know where Meya Kamil is, do you?' Murray said in a voice as quiet as Craigie's, and to himself he added: 'And you think I might be able to help find him.'

10. Facts

‘No,’ agreed Craigie, ‘we’ve no idea where Meya Kamil is. In fact we don’t know much more than you. We now know that he sent his niece away—our agents on the island sent us word as soon as they knew—and we can assume that was because he expected some kind of danger. He didn’t tell the British Resident—in fact he told no one that he expected anything to go wrong. He disappeared after making arrangements for the girl to leave.

‘We were watching the house in Hampstead, where she was to stay with relations. When she didn’t turn up, we put out a call for her—and we’ve told you about our man who nearly found her.’

Murray said gruffly: ‘Well, something is beginning to add up; I couldn’t even start to guess what got into the policeman and the subaltern at the cottage.’

It was the first time he had consciously thought of the officer since stepping into the helicopter; and now he saw a vivid picture of the youngster’s head after the bomb explosion. He clenched his teeth, for he could almost feel the heat of the fire again.

There was Oundle, too, and the other dead agent.

‘Do you think Juanita Lang knows where her uncle is?’ Murray asked abruptly.

‘We think she might have some idea,’ Craigie said. ‘It’s pretty evident that someone thinks she could talk, or she wouldn’t have been kidnapped and questioned, and there wouldn’t have been such desperate efforts to kill her rather than allow us to get her.’

Murray said slowly: ‘That’s a point. What happened to the many you caught near the cottage?’

‘He won’t talk much.’

‘No way of making him?’

‘We’d make him if we thought he knew anything worth while,’ Loftus put in, and went on quietly: ‘He says he was told to go with the others and get the girl back. Then our man tried to help her. They reached your garden, and Juanita went one way, our man another to try to draw their fire. Juanita herself has said that, now, and the prisoner confirms it. She hid inside the well, not thinking she’d have to stay so long. Then you turn up, and the prisoner and the others went back to Cliff House for instructions. But there’d been a panic at Cliff House. A man named Mikolas, who had rented it from Mr. Abbott, realised that the house wasn’t safe, and he cleared out. We don’t know where he went. We do know that the men you fought had to telephone for instructions, and that as a result of the telephone call, the Spitfire was sent to destroy the cottage—and the girl.’

Loftus broke off.

‘Does the prisoner know where to telephone?’ Murray asked slowly.

‘He says not. He insists that only one man had the number and was killed. Nothing found on him suggests that he’s lying, but—we haven’t stopped trying,’ Loftus added dryly. ‘And we’re trying to trace the take-off and flight of that Spitfire.’

‘Nothing useful found at Cliff House?’

‘Only that a dozen or more Cannans stayed there with Mikolas,’ said Loftus. ‘As it is, we’re almost back where we started from—with the one or two significant differences you know about.’

Murray said: ‘The trouble in the island only came into the open yesterday, didn’t it?’

‘The first trouble, yes; but indications are that the revolt is extremely well prepared,’ Craigie put in. ‘The balloon’s about to go up in the island, and we still can’t produce Meya Kamil. If we could show that he’s alive and well, and prove that we’d no intention of displacing him, the trouble would probably be over in a few days. Well, you’ve a pretty close look at the situation now, Murray. Reached any conclusions?’

Murray said mildly: ‘Let me have a few more guesses first. You’ve got to find out whether Juanita Lang knows where her uncle is, or whether she’s telling the truth.’

Craigie nodded.

‘And you’d like me to find out, as she has reason to be grateful to me,’ went on Murray dryly.

Craigie said slowly: ‘Yes, Murray, that’s it. She is heavily in your debt, of course. She’s young and impressionable and you might be able to influence her. She lived with the Good man of Canna’s family much of her life, and probably knows more about it than anyone else we can question. We want you to get all the information you can from her, even if she doesn’t know where Meya Kamil is—she may know much more than she’s said about the political situation. She may know a great deal which we don’t, too, simply because she’s lived so close to Meya Kamil for years.’

‘I can try,’ Murray said. ‘But what else are you going to do? Surely you’ve some means...’

‘Every known Cannan in England is being watched, because we’ve suspected a plot of some kind for months,’ Craigie said. ‘But we didn’t get on to Mikolas until it was too late. He lives in Cairo, we didn’t associate him with Canna, and—well, we’re concentrating on this job now, because it could be vital.’

Murray nodded.

‘There’s another thing,’ Craigie went on. ‘The girl might be attacked again. If she is, we must catch her assailant alive.’

Murray said bleakly: ‘Yes. I see.’

Craigie took the pipe from his lips, tapped it out and put it in the rack, and then stood up.

‘Come over here a minute, will you?’ he asked, and moved towards the office end of the room. ‘I want to show you one of our records—a kind of debit and credit account.’

He opened a drawer in one of the desks, and took the book out. He let a few of the pages flutter through his fingers, and then opened it at random at a page which was filled with names. Just names. One of them was Wyatt— that was at the top, and the date beside it was two years old. And at the foot of the same page was *Wyatt, Jane Robina.* Against some of the names, including Wyatt’s there was a small black mark.

Craigie said: ‘That’s a book with a list of all the Department Z agents in it. I’ve kept it for nearly thirty years. Have a look at page one.’

Murray did so, feeling his heart beating fast, knowing a tension which was almost as acute as any at the cottage. The first name on the list was Davidson. Then came two of the same name—Best, Michael, Best, Martin. There were twenty or more names on one page—and only three were without a little black mark.

One of those three was: ‘Loftus, William.’

‘The debit balance is pencilled in at the foot of each page,’ said Craigie. ‘The

black mark means that the agent didn't live to see a job through—as Oundle probably won't see this one through—and as Davis, our man killed last night, was killed. We've had a total of over four hundred and twenty-three agents since we began, and the active service deaths are two hundred and thirty-seven.'

Craigie watched Murray closely as he spoke.

'I see,' Murray said, and his mouth was dry. 'My chances if I join you?'

'That's right,' said Craigie. 'Your chances at their rosiest. This is a far worse affair than many. The Cannan revolutionaries are desperate—and they're obviously stopping at nothing, and it's at boiling point already. I should say your chances of coming through are about one in four.'

Murray said: 'Poor odds!' A grim little smile played about his lips. 'May I be sordid? Salary?'

'All your expenses, and two thousand pounds a year,' said Craigie promptly. 'If you join, you stay in the Department—we can't afford to release you, because you'd learn too much. You can keep in with a newspaper job, of course, that would be an excellent cover, but once you're in, the Department must have absolute priority, and you're in it for life.'

'Short but merry,' Murray said, and his smile crept into his eyes. 'So everything I've heard about you people is right. The Department of Doomed Men is how I heard it put not so long ago. Hmm. The thing is . . .' He paused.

'Yes?'

'How do I know if I'm good enough?' asked Murray. 'And how do I go about trying to find out what Juanita knows?'

'If we let you in, you're good enough,' Craigie said dryly, 'and as for the other—well, we've some tentative plans ready.' He stood there very still, spare, upright; and Murray had a strange impression, that he was ageless.

'Are you in?' he asked.

'Please,' said Murray.

Nearly three-quarters of an hour afterwards, Murray and Miller left the office, and the doors slid to behind them. In that time Murray had been briefed about Department Z as thoroughly as he could be, at short notice; he knew everything that was essential, now, to help him with Juanita Lang. He found himself wondering what the others really felt about him, and he was still powerfully affected by the influence of Gordon Craigie, the head of the Department of Doomed Men.

'Well,' Loftus said, deep in his throat, 'what do you make of him?'

Craigie was leaning back with his eyes closed.

'What do you?'

'Plenty, ' said Loftus, and chuckled, still very deep in his throat. 'I've seldom met anyone cooler, calmer, or better equipped.'

'I think I agree,' said Craigie. 'Fully satisfied?'

'Aren't you?'

Craigie said slowly: 'I prefer to study a man for weeks, if not months, and we've only had a few hours, but I can't see any way we've gone wrong here. I'd say he's completely reliable, and that he won't let anything frighten him into doing the wrong thing.' Craigie sat down at his desk, and took out another small book. 'In any case, we haven't much choice. If they get really busy on Canna . . .'

'Just how bad is it?' Loftus asked. 'Officially.'

‘We’ve been told time and time again that the loss of this territory or that base will be disastrous, and it hasn’t led to disaster yet,’ Craigie said quietly. ‘I know. It began with India, I suppose, and it’s gone along through the years, with Egypt and Cyprus as bad as any. But this time—well, you know I was with the Old Man this morning.’

‘Yes.’

‘He told me that the Service chiefs are really alarmed, that the Colonial Office reports that if we lose our grip on Canna we can say good-bye to effective control of most of the African colonies and territories.’ Craigie was brusque now. ‘There have been urgent representations from Washington: don’t let Canna go. We know that in Moscow they would put on a special *Ballet de Triomphe* if Canna became an open territory, or a so-called neutral. The simple fact is that unless we can produce Meya Kamil and convince the islanders that we’re not going to replace him . . .’

‘Out we go,’ said Loftus bleakly.

‘That, or we hold the island by military force, and that would be almost as bad—it might help militarily, it would damn us politically in African and Asian eyes. And . . .

Craigie broke off, as a pale blue light showed on a telephone. He shot a meaning glance at Loftus as he lifted it, for this was the direct line from Number 10. There was only the faintest of ringing sounds; the system here was mostly based on a series of lights.

He said: ‘Yes, Prime Minister?’

He listened.

He said: ‘I think we’re making some progress, and you can be absolutely sure that we’re doing everything we can. . . . Yes, we’ve found the girl and she’s not seriously hurt, but we haven’t been able to question her closely yet. . . . Yes, the moment we have any news at all I’ll call you, or Loftus will . . . Yes, Prime Minister.’

He paused for a moment, then said: ‘Good-bye,’ and rang off. He was pale and old-looking when he spoke to Loftus.

‘The Canna university students marched to Government House in Canna this morning,’ he said. ‘They asked for Meya Kamil, and when they couldn’t see him, they started a riot. Some were armed with hand grenades. Three policemen were killed, and nine wounded. Two regiments of the Guards are on their way to the island now, by air, to try to make sure that there isn’t a general rising, but . . .

Craigie broke off.

Loftus said slowly, grimly: ‘If you ask me, we haven’t a chance; we didn’t get on to it soon enough. What do we expect to get through Murray or the girl? Miracles?’

11. 5 Dineley Street

Murray heard the door slide to behind him, and glanced at Miller, to see if that affected the policeman at all. Miller took it matter-of-factly, as if he had closed the door with a handle in the usual way. Murray found himself wondering how a man who seemed to have so little imagination could make the progress that Miller had, for he was the senior Superintendent of the Special Branch, C.I.D. Perhaps he had got where he was because he had little or no imagination.

They stepped into a narrow street on Whitehall.

Oddly, Murray had hardly noticed that the door was there; he had passed it a hundred times, and driven or walked along Whitehall a thousand or more, and yet had never paid any attention to this particular door. It was painted a drab grey, and seemed almost to be a part of the wall.

They turned left, towards Whitehall, then left again towards Scotland Yard.

Murray had a queer impression; that although Miller appeared to be looking ahead all the time, he was actually looking about him in all directions. Two men were on the other side of the street, one at the wheel of a small car, another walking briskly.

'Seen 'em?' asked Miller, in a grunting voice. 'Our chaps always make sure we're not followed.' They turned towards Parliament Street and New Scotland Yard. 'Always try to make sure; somehow can't always manage it. Never know in these political jobs; the people you think are as safe as houses are fanatics at heart. If there's anyone I distrust, it's a fanatic. Also,' added Miller, and he glanced almost stealthily at Murray, 'you can have all the do-gooders for my money. Never did have much time for the people who get a big following among the people, they can soon become rabble rousers. Rabble rousers,' repeated Miller, as if he relished the phrase. 'Ever come across any?'

'Such as Sir Meya Kamil?' Murray said dryly.

Miller looked down his nose.

'Don't have to tell you what two and two come to, that's obvious. Well, Meya Kamil might be all right, but what's he disappeared for? That's what I'd like to know. I've been a copper for a long time now,' Miller went on—'I was a senior inspector before Cragie took on his first agents, that tells its own story—and there's one thing I've always known. Didn't take me long to discover it, either.'

'What is it?'

'The obvious suspect is usually the right one,' answered Miller flatly. 'I'd want to know why Meya Kamil disappeared before I worried about much else in this job. Still, you've got to hand it to Craigie. Genius. That's what he is,' Miller went on, and there was real feeling in his voice. 'Genius, no other word for it. He sticks in that blasted office day in and day out—why, I've known him spent ten days there without getting a sniff of fresh air! —and when you see him he looks as if he's so tired he couldn't say boo to a goose, but nine times out of ten, he's got the answer before you have. *Genius,'* added Miller, as if he were going to make the repetition wearisome, and then he continued portentously: 'is the infinite capacity for taking pains. That's what someone said. Forget who it was, but he was right on the mark. That's Craigie. He's got a kind of card index instead of a mind—can't keep everything tucked away, of course, but he's expendable, I suppose; but if he

popped off, Loftus would have to have a staff of three or four to keep records that Craigie stores in his head. Not that I've anything against Loftus, but Craigie's the one who matters.'

'I can believe it,' Merrick said.

'You'd better,' said Miller, as they reached the corner of New Scotland Yard. To Murray's surprise, he shook hands. 'This is where we part company,' he declared, 'as far as I can tell you, we weren't followed, and if the other chaps had noticed anyone showing any interest in us, they would have warned us by now. We've got a system,' Miller added heavily. His big hand was very powerful. 'Go straight to that address Craigie gave you, 5 Dineley Street, and you'll get a further briefing. You've got plenty to remember as it is.'

'Plenty,' agreed Murray.

He turned away, and Miller went stamping between the big iron gates at the Yard, being saluted by two uniformed constables, who stood on duty.

Murray looked across the road, to Big Ben and the Houses of Parliament. Big Ben was free of the scaffolding which had surrounded its tall tower when he had last spent a few days in London. The whole building had a brushed-up look. He hesitated, and then turned towards Westminster Bridge, and walked over it, simply so that he could get the view from the other side. To him, this was the beauty and the purpose of London. It was a perfect day for walking and seeing, with a bright sun, a nip in the air, and only the faintest of hazes on the river itself. The gothic majesty of the Houses of Parliament was reflected in the smooth water of the Thames, and in the other side were many fine buildings, the new and the old contrasting. On the river itself some slow-moving barges and, moored for the winter yet resplendent in bright paint, the pleasure-steamers which would ply in the spring and summer.

Murray walked back over the bridge.

He had stolen fifteen minutes, and yet as he drew nearer the Parliament buildings he felt a deep satisfaction and a sense of purpose. Here was not only the heart of London but the heart of Commonwealth He felt almost like the Powers That Were of the *Post-Dispatch,* could almost call it the heart of the Empire. Jingoism? Its days were not quite over but undoubtedly they were numbered, and meanwhile it was a fact that the picture he now saw in reality was familiar to millions of people throughout the world as a symbol of the aim of all men; freedom. Not the only symbol, but perhaps the first which had become so widely known; certainly there was none greater.

In there, probably today, there would be a Question on the Order Paper: *'Will the Minister for Colonial Affairs inform the House what steps are being taken to make sure that the regrettable incidents on the Island of Canna, so long renowned for its loyalty, do not develop into serious disorders?'*

And the answer?

'I am satisfied that the necessary steps are being taken and can reassure the House.'

Nonsense.

Dineley Street was a cul-de-sac, off Jermyn Street, and within a short distance of Piccadilly, although there was no direct approach to Piccadilly itself. It was a short street, with thirty tall houses in it, all terraced, all in good repair, most of them recently painted. Three, with a single front entrance, had the sign Dineley Hotel.

Murray expected to find that was Number 5, but Number 5 was next door, freshly painted cream and black, with some flower-boxes already filled with wallflowers ready for the spring, shining windows, spotless curtains. Nothing suggested that it was an apartment house until one got inside, and in the hall was a small board with names printed opposite the flat numbers.

5. Mr. Nigel Raymond Murray, O.B.E.

Murray chuckled.

'They beat the band,' he said.

There was a small, self-operated lift. Flat 5 would almost certainly be on the top floor, and he pressed the button. The doors slid to, just like that in the wall of Craigie's room, and again he found himself chuckling. When he stepped out, he didn't feel surprised by the visiting-card which was fitted in a small bracket close to his door.

He might have been here for months.

He unlocked the door with a key which Craigie had given him, and stepped inside. As he did so, he heard a sound just inside the flat, a soft, furtive movement.

Now, his heart hammered.

He had been told that he would have the flat to himself; yet someone was inside.

He dropped his hand to his pocket and his fingers closed about the automatic pistol which Loftus had given him.

If he went out again, closing the door, he would warn whoever was inside that he had heard the sound. If he went forward pretending to have noticed nothing, there was at least an even chance that he would run into serious trouble. This had come so quickly upon the quiet reflection by the river that it was hard to think clearly.

He went inside, closed the door, and then opened it again without making any sound; and he left it ajar. At least there was a way of retreat open.

He stood in a small hall, much the same shape as that at the cottage, but larger. Three doors led off it, two closed and one open. He would not have heard the sound through a closed door, would he? Danger, if it was danger, would come from the room with the open door.

He began to whistle softly, dropped the gun into his jacket pocket, took off his raincoat and hat and hung them inside a wardrobe cupboard which took up much of the space in the hall. His heart wasn't beating so fast now, but he was still very much on edge.

He opened one of the closed doors; it led to the bedroom, and beyond it he could see the tiled surround of a bath. So the open door led into the living-room.

Murray took out the gun and opened the door very briskly, and went straight in, glancing right and left—and seeing nothing. Nothing. He didn't know whether to be disappointed or relieved, but he felt silly. He was dreaming things up; the events of the morning had been too much for him. He dropped the gun back into his pocket and looked round the room. It was pleasantly furnished, there was a radiogram and a television, everything a modern man could expect for comfort. Two of the etchings on the wall near the door were very pleasant.

He glanced at his watch. It was a little after one o'clock. Less than twelve hours ago he had gone to bed without dreaming of what would be coming later in the night. He'd read until one, he could remember getting up, stretching, yawning . . .

Then, he stopped abruptly.

There was something on the floor by the window, scuttling along the edge of the carpet.

It was a black spider, its body the size of a sixpence.

The creature stopped, as if it was aware that Murray was looking at it. There was a shivery feeling running up and down his spine, at sight of the thing. He had never seen one like it in England; you didn't find them in England. If this was a Canna spider, its bite could kill, and would certainly be serious. The thing moved again, as if to get out of his sight, and then stopped—and as it did so, Murray saw another movement beneath a three-seater couch.

Another spider, shiny, black, with hair growing over its squat body. The black spiders of Canna were deadly, remember . . .

From behind him, a man said: 'Do you not like my pets, Mr. Murray?

Murray heard the voice, and his body stiffened, but he didn't turn around. The spiders hypnotised him. He was used to the huge insects of the hot countries; normally he would have known what to do, but two spiders here—and there might be others—was something so shocking that he wasn't yet in control of himself.

'Don't you?' the man repeated softly.

Now, Murray turned round.

It was a small man. Murray had seen him before, at the cottage. He had sharp features and thin lips, and when he smiled his teeth showed, pointed and sharp. His eyes were large and almost black, and his eyebrows were sharply defined, his hair was jet black.

He held a gun.

Murray saw that, and knew that it wasn't an ordinary pistol; it had a short barrel and a curious muzzle, rather like the old type blunderbuss—or like the top of a small flower vase. In the small, pale brown hand it was very steady. The man had come from the bedroom, for he was standing just in front of it, and the door was ajar.

'Surely you are not struck dumb,' the Cannan murmured, and he glanced down towards the couch. *'Don't* you like my pets?'

Murray, his hand inches from the gun in his pocket, his heart thumping, and trying to see the spiders out of the corner of his eye, managed to speak calmly.

'I prefer them to you,' he said.

The man's black eyebrows shot up.

'How very English of you, Mr. Murray, to find a way of being insulting even in circumstances like these. Have you ever been bitten by a Cannan spider?'

'Not yet,' Murray said.

'So calm, so phlegmatic, so *English."* Somehow, the man turned that into a sneer. 'That is about right, Murray, 'not yet.' There is plenty of time to find out how painful it is. How many have you seen? Two—yes, I suppose so. There are six in the flat altogether, and they are very fond of honey. Did you know that? Like ants. If I were to leave you here, perhaps with your shirt open and a little honey smeared on your manly chest, it would be salutary, wouldn't it, Murray? Oh, they would bite. The poisonous wound is very, *very* painful. And don't imagine that I couldn't do that; I assure you that one little puff from my gun would put you to sleep, and afterwards you would not be able to protect yourself. For myself, I am protected.' He put out a foot, and showed that he was wearing boots which fitted snugly round his ankles,

and seemed to go some distance up his calf.

Murray said roughly: ‘What do you want?’

‘Ah, that is better,’ the little man said; ‘that suggests that you realise how unpleasant this could be. I want the truth from you, Murray. Did the girl Lang tell you where to find Meya Kamil?’

Murray said, very slowly: ‘No. She said she didn’t know.’

‘So, she said she didn’t know,’ echoed the sharp-faced man, and he frowned; it wasn’t a pleasant sight. ‘That is what she told us. I shall have to believe it soon, no doubt. All right, another question—does Craigie know where Meya Kamil is?’

12. The Spiders

The question stabbed through Murray like the point of a dagger. It told so much: that this man knew of Craigie, which meant that he also knew of Department Z; that he also knew that Murray had been to see Craigie, and might know what Craigie could tell him about the Good Man of Canna. The shock was almost great enough to make Murray forget the spiders for a moment; but not for long.

One of them darted towards him.

He drew his breath, sharply.

It seemed to be coming straight at him, and he kicked out at it. It actually ran over his shoe, then scuttled away; but it stopped while still in sight.

And there were six of them here.

'You see, they are interested in you already,' the Cannan said smoothly. 'I'm sure they would derive a lot of innocent enjoyment from biting you. Of course, we would wait until you had regained consciousness before smearing the honey on you; it would be a waste of opportunity if they were to bite you while you were unconscious, wouldn't it?' He paused and then asked again: 'Does Craigie know where Meya Kamil is?'

Murray could say that Craigie didn't, and probably convince the man that it was true, he didn't think that would be difficult, but—what would the consequences be? This man, and the forces whom he represented, were desperately anxious to find the Good Man of Canna, would do anything to get him. If they could be sure that Craigie did not know where Meya Kamil was, it might help them; certainly they would know that they had time to look for the man. Their great weakness was that Meya Kamil might be produced at any moment; if he was, he could disprove their propaganda, and quieten the islanders.

'I don't know what Craigie knows,' Murray said abruptly.

'Have you not seen him?' When Murray didn't answer, the sharp-faced man took a step forward, thrusting the gun closer to Murray's face. 'Answer me; you have seen Craigie, I know that. You were taken to him by the policeman, Miller, and afterwards you were with Miller in Whitehall. In between this two times you saw Craigie. *Admit it!'* His voice rose to a screech. *'Admit it!'*

'Yes, I've seen Craigie,' Murray conceded.

'And are you to work for him?'

A movement beneath the couch caught Murray's eyes again, and he shivered involuntarily; he couldn't be sure that another spider wasn't behind him. There were six of them, remember, and he had only seen two. Only one was still in sight; for all he knew, the other might be touching his foot, might dart up his trousers, on to his leg.

'Answer me,' said the Cannan harshly; 'if you don't. . .

'Yes, I'm to work for Craigie.'

'What are you to do?'

'I am—to translate and interpret for him,' Murray improvised, and prayed that it sounded reasonable.

He was sweating, and there was icy coldness at his forehead and at the back of his neck. He saw the other man's quick frown, realised that the answer was the last thing that had been expected, perhaps in its way it had scored him a triumph, but...

He felt something touch his trousers.

No!

He twisted round. He couldn't see anything, and there was nothing on his leg now. He shook it, vigorously. Pain shot through his right ankle, but that was the old sprain, it was nothing to do with a spider; he had simply imagined the touch on his leg.

He turned to face the Cannan again.

'An interpreter,' the man echoed. 'Because you know the Cannan language, yes.'

'I know Arabic, Swahili, several African dialects, Hebrew, and Spanish,' Murray said. 'Languages are my strong point. Craigie is working on reports from Canna sent in several languages.' The lie was bolder now, and perhaps even more effective. 'He needs help with translation, and as I was already involved, he sent for me.'

'Is that *all*?' There was doubt in the near black eye, and a sneer in the set of the thin lips. 'Tell me, is that all?'

Was it enough?

Would he believe it?

Could he do what he had threatened with the black brutes which were hidden under the furniture?

Cold fear made Murray shiver.

'Is that all?' the Cannan demanded, and now he raised the gun so that it pointed directly at Murray's face, as if he would spray gas from it at the touch of the trigger. He was out of arm's reach; there was no hope of getting at him and knocking the gun out of his hand.

'No,' Murray said, and licked his lips.

'What else are you to do?' asked the Cannan, very softly. 'Tell me everything, Murray, and remember how painful . . .'

He broke off—and glanced down at Murray's feet.

Murray moved his foot with desperate speed, felt the rise of panic again because he felt sure that one of the creatures would be there; it wasn't. When he looked up, the little man was grinning; on his face there was a hint of a cruelty buried deep in him.

'What else?' he insisted, more softly. 'Hurry.'

Murray said, as if he had to force every word out: 'I am to get in touch with all the newspapers, and find out if any of them have information which would help Craigie.'

Quick as a flash came the next question: 'Help him with what?'

'Finding out—who is behind this.'

'Is that *exactly* what you *mean?'*

'What else could he want?' asked Murray roughly, and managed not to look down again, although the little man glanced at the floor just by his side, as if he had seen a scuttling movement. 'He knew there was disaffection, he doesn't know who was behind it, and newspaper correspondents often pick up information which don't reach official channels.'

'I think I understand you,' the Cannan said, as if he was convinced at last. He lowered the gun a trifle, as if the pressure were off, and then went on in a flat voice: 'Understand this, Murray. From time to time we shall ask you questions, and you will always answer us truthfully, for there are more painful things than the bite of a spider.'

Murray said: ‘How can we get rid of the damned things?’

‘Never mind that yet,’ said the little man. ‘I have other questions for you. First—where is Juanita Lang?’

‘I don’t know,’ Murray said sharply.

‘You expect me to believe that?’ the Cannan sneered. ‘Don’t take me for a fool, my friend; we shall get the girl soon, she cannot keep away from us for long. Tell me now, and it will save you from much pain and trouble. Also—it may be possible for you to help *her.”*

He was watching narrowly, as if to find out whether that mattered to Murray.

Murray said: ‘A lot you care about that.’

‘Oh, yes,’ the little man told him, ‘we care about her. All that has happened is Craigie’s fault. We wanted only to question her and find out where her uncle is—but after you and Craigie’s man rescued her, it seemed better to kill her and make sure she didn’t tell you anything. We would still rather see her dead than in Craigie’s hands; but if we can get her back we shall not hurt her, Murray, we shall only make her tell us what we want to know,’ the man declared. He paused and then went on again, speaking softly and insidiously: ‘You are not a wealthy man, are you? Our leader Mikolas will pay you very handsomely for help in finding Juanita Lang—and she will not be hurt.’

So this was the trump card.

Murray couldn’t make up his mind whether it was better to let the man think he might accept a bribe, or to reject the offer out of hand.

‘Murray, let me tell you . . .’ the man began; but then he stopped abruptly.

Murray had heard nothing, but obviously the little man had. He shot a glance over his shoulder, and in that moment he gave Murray his first ghost of a chance to act. Murray grabbed it. He moved swiftly, swinging out his right arm to knock the gas-gun aside. He saw the man turn round. *He saw a spider, close to them.* He heard a little hissing sound, as if the trigger had been pressed, but it was only momentary. He swung his left arm and caught the little man on the side of the jaw. He felt the impact of the blow, jarring his arm, and saw the man go flying towards the couch.

The gas-gun dropped.

He saw the man fall, and then saw not one but two spiders, *on his face.*

The man from the Isle of Canna screamed; and went on screaming.

As the screams came, the front door of the opposite flat opened, and a man Murray had never seen before ran in, with Jane Wyatt just behind him.

Murray had known things happen quickly, but never more quickly than now.

The stranger saw what had happened, said: ‘Jane, get a razor or a sharp knife, quickly,’ and while speaking bent down and grabbed the Cannan’s wrists and began to drag him towards the landing door. The spiders were out of sight now. Murray was moving towards the door quickly, scanning the floor, his breath coming in short, sharp gasps.

Jane Wyatt came back, with a razor blade in her hand. She looked scared, all the serenity had gone.

The man said over his shoulder: ‘Doctor, now.’

‘I’ll telephone,’ Jane Wyatt said.

Murray scanned the floor again, but saw none of the spiders; the noise and the

movement had scared them. The other man dragged the screaming Cannan on to the landing, and Murray slammed the door, to shut the brutes in. No one downstairs appeared to take any notice, but the door of the flat opposite was wide open, and Murray heard the woman's voice, then the ting of a telephone being replaced.

The Cannan was struggling and kicking out wildly and beating the stone floor with his clenched fists. There were red patches on his face.

'He'll be lucky if he lives,' said the stranger, and pushed the long hair back from his forehead. 'You have the luck too, don't you, Murray? I'm Mick Harrison—Craigie told you you'd be hearing from me.'

'Oh. Yes.'

'And you're getting it rough,' Harrison went on, but he didn't seem to be thinking of Murray, for suddenly he bent down and cracked his fist against the screaming man's jaw. He hit the right spot; the screaming stopped at once, and the man went limp. 'If I hadn't heard half of what he said to you, I'd say poor devil,' Harrison went on, 'but if ever a man asked for trouble, he did. What swine they are!' He used the razor skilfully, cutting across the bites, and blood welled up. He squeezed the swelling cheeks, to quicken the flow.

'Go and get a towel, will you—and a sponge? That's Jane's flat,' Harrison added. 'We discovered that one of these gentry was looking about this morning, and we were on the *qui vive.* Wanted to let them ask their questions and hope they gave something away, before we interrupted— didn't bargain for the spiders, though.'

Harrison paused, and then went on jerkily:

'Heard you come. Knew things were likely to move soon. Then he came, and you . . .' He broke off.

He was a chunky man, with a broad face and a square chin, and he looked very strong, and now faintly amused.

'Craigie always did say that some men were born for this game,' he went on. 'You must be one, you know the tricks instinctively.'

Jane Wyatt came out, with a bowl of water and a towel.

'So does she,' Harrison said. 'Don't you touch him, Murray; you've got those skin burns. If we could save his life we might make him talk.'

There was a sound downstairs, and a youngish man carrying a black bag came hurrying up; see a man with a black bag and say 'Doctor'. This one reached the prostrate Cannan as Harrison told him what had happened, and he pulled a face.

'Yes, Jane told me a bit. I'll do what I can, and the ambulance is on the way,' he went on, and then looked up at Murray. 'New chum?'

'Nigel Murray, Reggie Smith,' said Harrison. He grinned. 'Believe it or not, it's a real name! We'll leave this chap to you, Reggie; I don't need to say that it would be a good thing if you could bring him round enough to talk. After that, the devil can have him for his own. Now I'd better get a spider exterminator squad,' Harrison went on, and took Murray's arm, but he espied the gas-pistol and sniffed it cautiously. 'Don't recognise it,' he said; 'better not use it. Just squeezed the trigger before you clouted him, didn't he?'

'I heard a hiss.'

'Couldn't have released much,' Harrison said. 'Well, let's see how Jane's getting on,' he said. 'Did I tell you that you were a lucky man?'

'Er—yes,' said Murray. He wished he could shake off the feeling, almost of numbness, that had set in since he had come out of the flat. He couldn't. He knew that Harrison was aware of it, and suspected that the other man wasn't surprised.

‘Yes, you did.’

‘I only told you half the reason; the better half is to come.’ they stepped inside the other flat, which seemed to be identical with the one across the landing. ‘You have made a hit with our Jane.’

‘Eh?’

‘Wake up. Our *Jane.* The one and only Jane, bless her dear heart. She said she didn’t think she’d ever met anyone with quite the same brand of apology for courage.’

‘Oh, nonsense!’

‘I believe you, but our Jane doesn’t,’ said Harrison.

Jane Wyatt appeared at the door of the kitchen. Her hair was a little fluffy, and her face slightly flushed, as if she had been bending over something hot. She wore a plastic apron over her yellow blouse and the same skirt that she had been wearing at the cottage. The serenity was back.

‘Stop talking nonsense, Mick,’ she said; ‘go and telephone, then mix Nigel a drink. Lunch will be ready in ten minutes.’

Harrison sniffed.

‘What’s cooking?’

Jane laughed. ‘You’re a complete fool! It’s nothing much, anyhow; I’m heating up lamb stew, with some frozen peas and canned potatoes.’

‘What life does to a woman in these sad days,’ Harrison said, as if glumly, and led Murray into the living-room. ‘Care to wash and brush up while I phone for the spider squashers and mix the drink? What’s it to be, by the way?’

‘Is there beer?’

‘I never mix beer.’

‘Is there?’

‘Abstemious Algy, are you? But I expect you’re wise,’ said Harrison. ‘Yes, there’s beer. Don’t be long, you may not have seen it in her eye, but Jane’s reputation for lamb stew is world-wide. She must have learned the know-how from the Arabs.’ He showed Murray into the bathroom, and then turned round, and Murray stood for a moment at the hand-basin, looking at himself in the mirror.

He was very pale, and it must be quite obvious to anyone that he hadn’t really recovered. It was more than obvious to him; if he heard a sudden noise, he believed he would jump a yard. He began to wash, and the cold water stung and refreshed him, but he didn’t hurry. He felt that he wanted to be right on top of himself before he joined the others, and he knew that it wouldn’t be easy to fool Jane Wyatt. She had a way of looking into a man as if she could read his thoughts and could sense his feelings.

Could she?

If she sensed them now, she would know that he was more frightened than he had ever been in his life. It might be the cumulative effect of shock; he would probably have been all right if he’d had a day or so to recover from what had happened at the cottage, but—the fear was in him. Even as he stared at his own pale reflection, he was seeing other things in his mind’s eye. Juanita, clinging to the side of the well; Juanita, in the water, her hair floating, and everything so silent and Juanita, lying on the divan and looking dead. Young Lieutenant Soames, mother’s pride and England’s pride brisk and efficient—and dead with the top of his head blown off. Oundle, so bright, with those big eyes and that lively manner—and Oundle, who might not live and certainly would be a hideous sight for the rest of his

life, even if he survived.

The man at the corner, too.

Now, this.

Murray heard a radio voice, as he dried his hands and then went into the other room. A table was laid in the window, for three, two vegetable dishes were on it, with steam escaping round the lids. Harrison, with a small glass in his hand, was listening to the radio voice, heels together, eyes narrowed as he looked at the ceiling.

Jane came from behind Murray.

'Mind out of the way,' she said, and Murray moved quickly to let her pass him, carrying a huge dish of lamb stew, with carrots and onions and dumplings, clouds of steam rising, and the smell enough to make his mouth water.

'. . . According to messages which have just reached London from the Island of Canna' came the radio voice, *'Rumours that the Governor of the Colony, Sir Meya Kamil, has been removed from office are causing grave disturbances, among many villagers, students, and other groups. A Colonial Office spokesman denies . . .'*

Jane Wyatt, who had stopped quite still, moved slowly towards the table and put the dish down.

'If we don't find Meya Kamil soon,' she said, 'I wouldn't like to say what's going to happen to that island.' She paused. 'But it won't help things if we starve ourselves; pull up your chairs.'

13. Friends

It was after four o'clock.

Murray was back in his own flat, alone. He did not know whom Craigie had sent, but someone had killed the spiders, gassing them, and he had seen all six before they had been taken away for examination. It might be possible to find out for certain where they had come from, as there were differences in the species which came from different lands. He was sure they were the Cannan spiders.

Murray felt calmer, and more himself.

He knew that much of that was due to the steadying influence of Jane Wyatt. Harrison had helped, as far as it went, but the woman was a controlling factor, and he was quite sure that Craigie and Loftus found her invaluable because of the way she could calm men. Her friendliness, her naturalness, and the way she refused to be flustered, were all quite remarkable; and as he studied the instructions which Craigie had given him, he kept finding himself thinking about her.

It was nearly half-past four when he finished learning off by heart the contents of certain papers that Craigie had sent to him; codes, the way to get in and out of Craigie's office, the way to telephone, whom to call at Scotland Yard if he needed emergency help, how to establish himself as a Department Z man with provincial police forces, if it became necessary. He had not heard from Craigie again, but knew that once he had learned all of this by heart, he was to destroy the papers. He burned them in the living-room fireplace, and then went and stood by the window, looking out towards Jermyn Street. He saw the stream of traffic and the hundreds of people, and none of them dreamt what was happening in their midst. So many people would probably shrug their shoulders, anyhow, as if the Island of Canna didn't really matter.

It not only mattered, it was vital.

Yet Murray did not find himself thinking only about the island's political and possible military significance.

There was Juanita.

The Cannan who had come here had believed that she knew where to find Meya Kamil, and it was brutally clear that she was in acute danger. If Mikola's men could not kidnap they would kill her.

Murray didn't know where she was. At least, it seemed as if they didn't know yet, either.

Jane—he no longer thought of the 'Wyatt'—had told him that the girl was all right, and there was no need to worry. That was easy to say, less easy to accept. Murray would have said that he was quite safe until he had stepped into the flat. He had been used as a bait by Craigie, too; and might by now have been just a name in a book, ticked off in black.

He shivered.

Forget it.

He was to see Juanita again soon, he knew, and he found himself looking forward to it with a curious excitement. She couldn't be more that twenty-one and he was thirty-five, but —she excited him. Perhaps it was because he had admired her courage last night, admired the way she had taken any risk to escape, as if courage came naturally to her.

Where was she? Safe, remember, so far.

And did she know where her uncle was?

The telephome bell rang.

It was the first time he had heard it ring since he had been here, and it made him jump. So his nerve wasn't as steady as he wanted it to be. The instrument was on a table by the fireplace, where the papers were still smouldering; he ought to put some newspaper beneath the embers and make sure that nothing remained.

He moved to the fireplace and lifted the receiver.

'Murray speaking,' he said.

'Craigie,' said Craigie, and then to make sure that there was no doubt, he added: 'E-I-G. . .'

'I've got it,' Murray said 'Spelt backwards.' That was a simple kind of identification, but presumably it worked.

'Good,' went on Craigie in his unemotional voice. 'Two or three items of news for you, Nigel.' The use of surnames seemed unpopular in this organisation. 'First, the gas at the cottage isn't widely known or used, but it is one of the most deadly of the poison gases, and only one thing saved you and Juanita Lang.' He paused, while Murray felt the old tensions coming back, and wondered what would happen next. 'It is liquid when stored, and the gas is created by contact with the air,' Craigie went on. 'You put that blanket over it, and stopped it from gasifying.'

'Oh,' said Murray blankly. 'Harrison was talking about my luck.'

'That's one word,' said Craigie dryly. 'The next—those spiders do come from Canna. There aren't many of them, most have been exterminated on the island, but there are still several colonies in the mountains in the south-west of the island.'

Murray said: 'I know. What's new?'

'We couldn't save the man.'

'Oh,' said Murray, and looked blankly out of the window.

No one had put it into words, but he knew just how desperately it had been hoped that the Cannan's life would be saved, so that he could be asked questions. Luck didn't always blow the right way. But it blew the right way sometimes, and he remembered the moment when a spider had run over his shoe, and the other when he had felt something at the bottom of his trousers.

Craigie said: 'How are you?' as if Murray's silence worried him.

'Jittery.'

'You're going to need a rest,' said Craigie, 'and we'll send you a pick-me-up. Take the night off and see a show, or do anything you like. We'll have you covered all the time.'

'Thanks,' said Murray.

It would be a good idea to get his mind off the danger, if only for an hour or two—but he doubted whether there was a play in London which could do that. Unless the Abbott's new farce—the first night had been wildly received, he remembered. He put that thought out of his mind, and asked:

'How's Juanita Lang?'

'She's perfectly all right,' said Craigie, 'and she's going to stay with her relations at Hampstead.'

Murray exclaimed: *'What?* Good God, that's asking for . . .'

'We'll run into trouble whether we ask for it or not,' Craigie interrupted quietly; 'we must get more prisoners, and we'll make quite sure they don't harm her.'

'If you let them get as near to her as they did to me . . .' Murray began.

‘We won’t,’ Craigie interrupted. ‘And if she goes to Hampstead, with her relations, she’ll feel much better. We’ve surveyed the house, of course. It’s flanked by a block of flats on one side and another house on the other. There’ll be a large concentration of people there to look after her—and to look after anyone who dares make an attempt to get through to her.’

There was a pause. Then:

‘You know the odds,’ said Murray abruptly.

‘You keep on going as you’ve started,’ said Craigie. ‘Take the night off, too, this pick-me-up which I’ll send round, and in the morning go and see Juanita.’

‘All right,’ said Murray. ‘Thanks.’

When he rang off, he wondered gloomily whether Juanita was in fact as safe as Craigie made out.

There was one simple and inescapable fact: Juanita had to be used by Craigie, Craigie simply had no choice. Unless she did know where her uncle was, Juanita’s chief value was as bait.

Face it.

‘Murray said aloud: ‘All right, I’ve faced it,’ and turned savagely towards the window—and then heard a different bell ring. This was the front door. He didn’t want to speak to anyone just then, and he stood looking at the closed door of the living-room, trying to guess who it was, wondering whether the caller would go away if he didn’t answer. Then he moved slowly towards the door. He was getting childish. This might be Craigie’s men, might be an important caller—and it *might* be another man carrying spiders.

He went briskly to the door, hand at his gun, and opened it an inch—and saw Jane Wyatt.

‘I wondered if you’d like to have a cup of tea with me,’ she said. ‘I’m just making some.’

‘Oh, happy thought!’ Murray took the chain off the door. He felt a little foolish, but she appeared not to notice that, and he had been told that he must take every possible precaution. ‘Here or in your flat?’

‘In mine; I’ve laid the table,’ Jane said.

Murray closed the door of his, and went across with her. Now, a low table was laid for two in the window, there were sandwiches so thin that he had almost forgotten they could be cut like that, tea, some small cakes, obviously home made. He found himself studying Jane, and realising that she was much nicer looking even than he had noticed before.

He told her about the night off.

‘So I should think,’ Jane said; ‘the one fault I’ve ever had to find with Gordon is that he sometimes thinks that a man can live without sleep—just because he seems to!’ Her eyes crinkled attractively when she smiled. ‘What show were you thinking of doing?’

‘What’s it called?’ Murray said, and frowned. ‘The Abbotts’ new show; something about colour . . .’

‘Penny Coloured,’ Jane said, her face lighting up. ‘I’m told it’s wonderful, but I doubt if you can get a seat.

They’re always a sell-out. I remember when I was in Malaya they were out with a show for the troops, with a really big company, too.’

Murray chuckled.

‘So big that they often charter a small cargo-boat, and man it with the company

itself.'

'You know them as well as that?'

'Oh, that's information which just got around, Abbott doesn't boast about it,' Murray said. 'I met them in Cyprus on one of their tours—he's quarter Cypriot—and we've met once or twice since, most recently about that cottage. I'll ring them,' added Murray. 'If there were any seats, I'm sure they'll fix it. May I make it for two?'

'Of course.' She seemed really pleased.

'Fine,' said Murray.

He called Lester Abbott, who answered the telephone himself, and sounded surprised that Murray was back from the cottage; so nothing had been said to him, yet. Sooner or later, probably sooner, he would have to be told. Craigie might be able to keep the story out of the newspapers, but he wouldn't be able to stop village gossip, and that had a habit of travelling fast. He ought to suggest to Craigie that he told Abbott.

He made his plea for seats.

'My dear chap, of course,' Abbott said readily; 'no problem at all, we always keep half-a-dozen up our sleeve and don't let them go until just before the curtain rises. Call at the box office for them, and then come round and see us after the show; I'll tell the stage-door chappie. Hope you like it. The notices have been rave, but Lilian and I think there are weaknesses . . .' He talked for at least five minutes, for he had only one love: the stage.

'That's wonderful,' Jane said, when Murray told her.

Murray telephoned the Department Z office, when Jane had gone. It was the first time he had dialled the number, which was changed every week, and it was the first time he had announced himself by spelling his name backwards; but somehow it did not seem even slightly like play-acting.

Loftus answered, and Murray was slightly disappointed.

'Oh, good thought,' agreed Loftus, when he'd said his piece. 'Gordon and I were talking about it; someone ought to tell Abbott, soon, and make sure that he doesn't make a fuss when he finds out. He'll be compensated, of course, tell him that. And try to get some information about the Cliff House tenant, without making it too obvious. Thanks, Nigel.'

Murray forgot that feeling of disappointment.

He had a snack with Jane, and they reached the theatre in good time. The seats were front-row stalls. There was the usual buzz of expectancy and satisfaction before the curtain went up, the usual hush, and the burst of applause when Lester Abbott wandered on to the stage. Then, the audience began to laugh. It went on laughing. Plot, title, staging, and *decor* all seemed to merge in one long riot. The tunes, mostly South American with a lot of rhythm, were all catchy. The cast was magnificent. Some white, some negro, a few between colours—hence the title. It dealt with the colour problem in a way which could offend no one. Lester Abbott, as an absent-minded doctor, and his wife Lilian, a blonde who was full of good works, were sponsoring a hostel and club for students from overseas. Some of the lines had a sting, for Murray; but generally it was an absorbing piece of nonsense. If it were ever taken on tour it would have the troops in hysterics. There wasn't a moment when the action looked like flagging.

It was good to laugh.

It was good to hear Jane laughing, too.

Yet . . .

It was almost frightening, in its way, that he could see the horrors he had seen that day, and yet could laugh like this in spite of the play's theme. Reaction? He didn't know. The thought struck him almost painfully as he made his way out of the auditorium towards the dressing-rooms.

Lester Abbott had seen and acknowledged him from the stage, and he mustn't seem quiet or preoccupied, but— well, the fact that he could do this seemed almost callous.

Jane was looking at him thoughtfully. Worriedly?

'If the Abbotts suggest we have supper with them, what would you like to do?' asked Murray.

'I don't think we ought to be late,' Jane said, and undoubtedly 'we' meant 'you'.

The dressing-rooms at the Glory Theatre were tiny, and two friends were already with the Abbotts. Lester, who was approaching fifty and on the stage looked nearer thirty, was tall, big, and good-looking in an aristocratic sort of way. Lilian was short, and plump, pretty and gay. Roguish. There was champagne, a babble of talk, delight in everyone who had anything to do with the play.

'We did a bit of re-plotting; just what it needed,' Lester Abbott explained to Murray. 'One or two scenes seemed a bit anti-colour, if you know what I mean; wouldn't do on the stage. That's why I was edgy this afternoon, sorry if I seemed offhand. All's well now. You really liked it?'

'It was wonderful.'

'Wonderful! Have a drink.' Abbott turned excitedly to Jane, who was talking to someone who hadn't been introduced and who looked as happy as if he had put a fortune into the play, then back to Murray.

It was going to be almost impossible to have a quiet word with him, but it had to be done.

'So you really liked it,' Abbott said, and looked as if he was sated with satisfaction. 'Really?'

'It was first class.'

'Have a drink?'

'Lester, can you spare . . .'

'Bottles, of it, old boy. I say,' went on Abbott, and leaned forward confidentally, 'if you don't mind my saying so, that's a very nice pretty you've brought along with you. As nice as any I've seen for a long time; comforting, if you know what I mean, reassuring. Just like Lilian isn't! Tell me, honestly, what did you think . . .'

At last they were on their own in the dressing-room, the Abbotts ready to leave, the theatre practically empty. Then Murray told them about the destruction of the cottage, very quietly, not sure what their reaction would be and hoping that he hadn't been wrong to take the responsibility of telling them.

'But, damn it, it's not in the evening papers,' Abbott protested, after an understandable show of bewildered astonishment. 'Aircraft crashed on—good lord! And you were *in* the cottage.'

'Nigel!' exclaimed Lilian, and then looked at his bandaged hand. 'Was that. . . '

'I'm all right,' Murray said hastily, 'and the plane was on a secret trial; that's why it's hush-hush. You'll get ample compensation.'

Abbott stared, as if puzzled, and then unexpectedly began to smile.

'Well, well,' he said. 'Hear that, Lil? We're going to get compensation for the cottage, and the next time we buy or build, we'll make sure there's running water!'

He laughed. ‘Pity it wasn’t Cliff House! I let that to a rum crew who answered an ad. in *The Times.* Did you see anything of them?’

‘No. What was rum about them?’

‘They said they were Cypriots, but I had my doubts,’ said Abbott. ‘Still, their money’s good! So’s the Government’s! Okay, Nigel, but thanks for tipping me off. What a bit of luck, though!’

‘Luck?’ Obviously Abbott couldn’t help much with the tenants.

‘A newspaperman on the spot, you must have a story strong enough to blackmail yourself back on to the *Post-Dispatch.’*

Murray chuckled.

Lilian said: ‘Lester, I’m famished, *really.* Are you sure you two sweet people won’t come and have supper with us? We’d love you to.’

In fact, both she and Abbott were tired. The first few nights of a new show were a strain, and teething troubles in this play had obviously worried them. Abbott himself looked as if he could go to sleep on his feet. It wasn’t difficult to make excuses, and it was as easy to agree with Jane that it would be a pity to eat out, they could have a sandwich at the flat.

It was good, being with Jane.

The ‘pick-me-up’ had been delivered before they had left, and Murray took a dessertspoonful, as directed, just before getting into bed. Trust Craigie, even to having something that could soothe away nerves and shock symptoms. Trust Craigie. It wasn’t difficult to do that, either.

Trust Craigie.

Even with Juanita?

Murray slept soundly, until after eight o’clock. He bathed, shaved, boiled some eggs, and made some toast, and at half- past nine left for the house in Hampstead, and for Juanita Lang.

He felt alert, wary, watchful, but his nerves weren’t ragged as they had been, and he felt completely confident, almost as if he had had a long rest, and was ready for the fray.

He began to whistly softly, under his breath, as he sat at the wheel of a Jaguar which had been outside the house; Harrison had telephoned to tell him it was there. He felt the controls almost affectionately; driving was one of his few hobbies. It responded perfectly, and he drove through thickening traffic towards Hampstead.

Approaching the house where Juanita was staying, he saw some workmen at a corner, digging at an electric main. A window-cleaner was busy at a small block of flats nearly opposite. Several tradesmen’s vans were in the road. He couldn’t be sure that these were Department Z agents, but it was pretty safe to say that some of them were.

Murray pulled into the carriageway. The house was large by modern standards, and the garden beautifully kept, with a small circular lawn and some rhododendron bushes which looked fresh and beautifully shaped. He remembered reading about Judge Lang’s passion for gardens and for big lawns, and the old man had lived here for much of his life.

No one appeared at any of the windows; everything seemed normal.

Murray got out, and approached the porch. He felt his heart quickening at the thought of seeing Juanita, and he told himself again that he was crazy; but he hadn’t known anything like this since he had first met his wife. Remember, he would

soon be middle-aged, and Juanita . . .

Forget it; he had a job to do.

He stepped on to the porch, and put a finger on the bell-push. He could not bear the bell ring inside, but didn't expect to; the domestic quarters would probably be at the back. Then, he heard an aeroplane approaching, and it was a propeller-driven craft, he couldn't mistake the sound. Thought of the Spitfire flashed into his mind, and he swung round, jerking his head upwards.

The plane was flying high over the Heath and did not seem to be heading this way.

Then, the door was opened by a pleasant-looking, middle-aged woman, and as she started to speak, Murray looked down at some swift movement; and saw a black spider.

It scuttled over the step and into the house.

14. Relations

There was a pale, beige-coloured carpet stretching from wall to wall, and Murray saw the spider scuttle towards a door, almost as if it had some uncanny sense of where it wanted to go. Then, it stopped at a closed door. The woman was staring at Murray in astonishment, for after that first moment he hadn't even looked at her.

'What. . .' she began.

'Sorry,' said Murray. He pushed past her, swiftly. She uttered a sharp exclamation of protest, and turned to watch him as he went racing forward. The spider stayed quite still, and the carpet muffled the sound of Murray's approach. Then quite suddenly a man appeared from another room, and said:

'All right, Murray.'

It was Harrison.

Murray saw him point what looked like a small water- pistol at the creature, saw the creature start to run towards the stairs. Now the woman saw it, and cried:

'Ugh, what's *that?'*

'Big spider,' the man answered promptly, and seemed intent on chasing the spider, but suddenly it turned over on its back, going flat and lifeless.

'Oh, how *horrible*!' the woman said. She was big-bosomed, fluffy-haired, and quite attractive.

'Knew there were some about,' said Harrison. He spoke affably, and his manner was almost foppish, very different from the side he had shown to Murray before. He dropped a handkerchief over the spider, and then calmly picked it up. 'Nothing to worry about now.' He smiled reassuringly at the woman, whose face had lost colour as she stared aghast at the handkershief in his hand. 'This is Mr. Nigel Murray, Mrs. Lang.' He glanced at Murray. 'Mrs. Lang knows that Juanita's in danger, and that's why I'm here.'

'I'm sorry I scared you,' Murray said, and smiled hopefully at Juanita's aunt. 'It scared me for a moment.'

'I should think it did,' Juanita's aunt said, and dabbed at her forehead. 'Dear me, I feel quite faint.' Already she struck Murray as being something of a poseur, and certainly her voice was affected and her manner almost melodramatic. She dabbed again, and sighed. 'Well, it certainly can't be helped, Mr. Murray. I think Juanita is expecting you.'

'How is she?' Murray couldn't keep the eagerness out of his voice.

'Oh, she is very well, and this morning she is much better than she was last night.'

'Good,' Murray said fervently. 'That's fine.'

'Please wait one moment,' said Mrs. Lang primly.

Murray told himself again that he was a fool, it was crazy that his heart should play tricks like this; but it did. He wondered what his reaction would be when he saw Juanita perhaps she would strike him as being so young that it was madness . . .

The older woman went into a room on the right. Murray stared at the door, and then looked away, annoyed with himself. He saw something on a small shelf which was fastened to the wall; it looked unusual, and he made himself step across and examine it. It was a small model of a building in white marble, and beyond it were

miniature rocks and hills. He didn't understand it until he leaned forward and read three words on a small brass plate screwed on the shelf.

Judge Lang's Tomb

Of course.

He had never seen this building, but when he had been on the Isle of Canna, he had heard about it. After Lang had died, Meya Kamil had raised funds, by public subscription among the poor people of the island, and they had given with eagerness and generosity, so that this tomb—in fact a mausoleum—had been built, and Judge Lang's remains interred there. The tomb was in the foothills of the mountains which had been torn asunder by the earthquake —after which Lang as well as Meya Kamil had played a heroic part. More of what he had learned came back to Murray. It was Judge Lang who had sponsored a public subscription in England for the victims of the earthquake—

Murray heard a movement, and turned round quickly.

Juanita came out of the room, with her aunt just behind her.

Murray hadn't quite known what to expect—whether she would be in bed, or resting in her room, or downstairs. He knew now. She had on a dress which was simplicity itself; a kind of glowing red, not bright or scarlet, and it fitted perfectly. He'd seen her in brassiere and panties, he'd seen her in a pair of borrowed pyjamas, but this—he would have to go a long way to see anyone with a figure to compare with Juanita Lang's.

Her eyes were glowing, and she came forward, obviously delighted to see him.

'Mr. Murray,' she greeted. 'I was afraid you were going to be late.'

She held out her hands.

He took them, and reminded himself harshly what he had to do: find out exactly what this girl knew, find out if there was anything she could tell him that would help to trace Meya Kamil. Now, it seemed absurd to think that she was even associated with Canna, or the troubles, or the murder of men.

'Hallo, Juanita,' he said, and he hoped that he could get away with that. 'It's good to see you.'

Standing close to him, she didn't make any attempt to take her hands away.

'Yes, good *is* the word,' she said, 'and—how do I even begin to say thank you?'

'Oh, please! Forget . . .'

'I have been told exactly what happened,' she said, 'and twice you saved my life. How on earth do you expect me to forget?'

Her directness was almost naive.

There was something else. She had made him forget, momentarily, that Harrison was still here, watching, and that her aunt was, too. Here was Juanita, and she was quite lovely, and capable of driving thought of everything else out of his mind.

And yet—the rebel Cannans would kill if they could not capture her.

She took her hands away, and asked:

'Do you know how the other man is?'

Oundle.

'No,' Murray lied, 'I haven't heard.'

'You'll tell me if there is any news, won't you?' asked Juanita, then turned towards the room from which she had come, and smiled at her aunt, who was already standing by the doorway. 'Do come and meet my cousins.'

Murray already knew the family set-up; it had been part of the briefing which he'd had from Craigie. Mrs. Lang was the sister-in-law of the Judge—Lang's brother had married a woman much younger then himself. There were Juanita's two cousins here, as well as her brother, Charles.

The cousins were boy and girl who probably believed that because they were in early twenties they should be regarded with some importance, and the brother was probably ten years older than Juanita.

She had taken after her father, but Charles Lang was sallow, almost swarthy-skinned. It would be easy to believe that he was wholly Cannan—as easy to see that he was the nephew of Meya Kamil. The likeness was startling, except in one respect—in size. The Good Man of Canna was short and small, but this was a tall, oddly, arrogant looking man, with his Roman nose and his dark, almost fiery eyes.

And it was obvious that he had little time for Juanita's new friend.

The atmosphere was stiff and formal, and Murray didn't like it. The trouble probably started from the aunt, who had undoubtedly given her own children a set of false values. Here was artiness and a veneer of culture which affected a conscious superiority, and it particularly affected their voices. They were twins; and Murray would have enjoyed seeing them get a sharp rebuff. They neither liked nor disliked him, they were simply indifferent, present here obviously out of a sense of duty, because this was the man who had saved their cousin's life.

Charles Lang was very different.

He said little, but what few words he uttered were courteous and to the point. He was an Asian as they were European, and there was no doubt that a sense of duty dictated his behaviour, too.

Murray wondered if Juanita was aware of all this.

Then one after the other the relations excused themselves, and he was alone with Juanita.

It would not have surprised him had she talked about her cousins or about Charles, but she stood by a window overlooking a wide lawn in perfect condition, with a herbaceous border at each of three sides, tidied for the winter, but with a few chrysanthemums giving it a spark of colour. There was a brick wall, and the gnarled trunks of two vines winding their way about it. In the background were trees, and in the distance the roof of another house. He could see a man working at the window of that house, and had no doubt that this was another of Craigie's agents, keeping watch.

Then: 'Have you heard about the troubles in Canna?' Juanita asked quietly.

'Yes.'

'Did you know of it yesterday?'

He looked surprised. 'Not until I'd come to London.'

'You knew nothing?'

'What makes you think I did?'

'I suppose I am just wondering,' said Juanita slowly, 'but you behaved almost as if you were prepared.' When she smiled, she looked more beautiful than ever. 'Oh, it is only Charles; he is always suspicious.'

'What about, this time?' asked Murray.

Now, her eyes began to laugh at him, as they had once or twice yesterday morning.

'Well, perhaps I talked too much about you,' she said. 'Charles is rather old-

fashioned about women, in the Eastern fashion. But it really doesn't matter.' She sat on a window-seat, and patted the place by her side. 'How are you, Nigel?' She pointed to his hand, and he wondered who had told her his name. 'Is that a bad burn?'

'Only a trifle, and I'm fine,' he assured her. 'I wanted to come yesterday, but you were too well guarded.'

'Yes, I know,' said Juanita. 'There is some fear that because I might be able to give information about my uncle. I am in danger. It's nonsense, of course. I know nothing. But —*did* you know about this protection for me?'

'The police hinted at it. They said they had to make sure you were properly looked after.'

'The police,' Juanita echoed. 'Of course, that is who they are—plain-clothes policemen! Eric and Muriel seem to think that is all a lot of fuss about nothing, but Charles is very worried.'

'So am I,' said Murray.

She looked out of the window, her head raised a little so that he could see her profile at its best. She was beautiful whichever way one looked at her, and her beauty hurt him. It was almost impossible to believe that he had pulled her up from that well, a rung at a time, and that he had worked himself to a standstill in bringing her round.

'Nigel,' she said.

'Yes.'

'If the police really think I am in danger, what are they doing about it?'

'The house is closely guarded.'

'Oh, yes,' said Juanita, and there was a look almost of scorn in her eyes as she turned to him. 'It could not be guarded any better than the cottage, could it? Before I went to sleep, I saw all the soldiers about everywhere, I told myself that there could not possibly be any more danger, but— look what happened. And there is that comical man here, Harrison. Does he really think that everyone is stupid? He might fool my Aunt Phoebe by talking of a Canna spider so lightly, but no one who had ever lived on Canna would be deceived.'

Murray said: 'So you heard that.'

'Of course, and saw it in his handkerchief. The door was ajar.' She drew her legs up under her and sat back with one arm against the window-ledge; she could not even begin to know how wonderful she looked, in that pose. 'Charles says that there's only one way to save my life.'

'How?'

'By taking me away to some place where I can't be found.'

Murray said: 'That might not be so easy as it sounds.'

'I could leave the country,' Juanita said, and suddenly she moved, and put a hand over Murray's. 'Nigel, what do you honestly believe? Am I safe here?' When he didn't answer at once, she went on: 'I don't *want* to die, you know.'

She didn't want to die.

Murray looked at her steadily, and was smiling a little, but there was no humour in the smile; it was drawn out of his admiration for her, and he was thinking of her spirit now, not her beauty or her body.

'I do not want to die.'

She had everything that life could possibly offer, and yet was as close to death as if it was standing at her side.

She was the bait for the plotters of Canna, too.

'What are you thinking? 'she asked abruptly.

'I was trying not to think,' Murray told her; 'I don't like thinking of the danger.' He felt the pressure of her hands; she had placed them both in his again, as if asking him to protect her. 'Juanita, did you expect outbreaks of trouble in Canna?'

'In a way.'

'Why?'

'My uncle told me that there were people on the island trying to make difficulties.'

'Did he name any of them?'

'No, he did not.'

'Did he say what kind of trouble he expected?'

She said slowly and hesitantly: 'No, but I am sure that he was gravely worried. Once or twice I asked him what was on his mind, and he told me that it was nothing with which I could help, and asked me not to speak of it to anyone else. But for the —the emergency,' she went on,' I would not have talked even to you about it.'

'Didn't he give you any hint?'

'No,' she said, and withdrew her hands. After a long pause, she went on: 'Why are you asking all these questions? They are practically the same questions that two other men have asked me.'

Murray said grimly: 'I suppose they are.'

. . .He stood up suddenly, because he could not withstand the searching candour of her eyes. He turned his head as he moved—and but for that he would probably not have noticed the movement at the door. It was almost imperceptible, and he saw it because the bright morning glinted on a polished handle. He stared at the door, and then glanced at Juanita.

Her colour was heightened, and proved him wrong in one respect; she could become lovelier. She moved off the window-seat and went across the room, reaching the door with hardly a sound. Then she pulled the door open.

A man exclaimed.

She said quietly: 'Charles, why are you listening?'

Although he moved towards her, Murray could not see her brother. He heard a sound of movement, in spite of the carpet. The girl stood frowning and looking into the hall, but as Murray drew level with her, her brother disappeared up the stairs; all he saw was the ends of his trousers and his brightly polished brown shoes.

Juanita turned round slowly, and closed the door. 'I am sorry,' she said. 'He seems as if he is afraid of everyone and everything. I have never known him like this.'

'Would he know where his uncle is?' Murray asked quietly.

She hesitated, looking at him with that searching candour, and then went to the window. Was she offended? Did she suspect more than she had said—or had he made it too obvious that he hadn't questioned her spontaneously? This wasn't his kind of job, he told himself angrily; action in a crisis was one thing, handling a girl like this was another; and he wasn't natural with this girl, she affected him as no one else he had ever known.

That was sober fact.

But Craigie . . .

There was one thing which Craigie had said, and which he hadn't thought much

about. That there were times when no set of rules, no briefing, no guidance, could be of any use, when an agent had to make his own decision, and act upon it quickly. And only the agent could judge the moment, only the agent could make the decision. It was part of the responsibility. It had seemed like almost platitudinous guidance at the time, but there was nothing platitudinous about it now.

Juanita turned to face him.

'Charles told me not to trust you,' she said abruptly. 'He told me that you were the Nigel Murray, of the *Post-Dispatch,* and that you would do anything for a story.'

That came out flatly.

Murray took out his cigarette case and opened it, almost without thinking. He found himself smiling. He found himself wanting to step forward and take her in his arms and kiss her—and it was no use telling himself that it put him next door to a lunatic. He'd known her for a few hours, and . . .

Forget it.

The cigarette gave him something to do with his hands.

He could see that she was disappointed that he hadn't denied the story, could see that she was already half persuaded that Charles Lang was right. Later he could worry about what prompted her brother to suggest this, even how Lang had been so quick to discover that he was Murray of the *Post-Dispatch*; but just now that wasn't important. Only one thing was, and it mattered much to Department Z and to this investigation, this fight against the threatened disaster; it was vital that she should not be hostile, that she should co-operate in every way she could.

Juanita began to turn away; she looked hurt, as a child might at some great disappointment.

'Your brother was only partly right,' Murray said quietly. 'He didn't know—he couldn't know—that I left the *Post-Dispatch* last week. I was at the cottage trying to get myself back on an even keel—I'd been with the newspaper for over fifteen years. I had no idea of what might happen at the cottage, I'd never heard of you, I knew about Canna in the way that every experienced newspaperman knows about most places. I'd been there twice, never for more than a few days. But after that. . .'

He broke off.

Eagerness came back into her eyes.

'Afterwards,' repeated Murray quietly, 'I was asked to help, because of the situation in Canna. It's ugly and it's dangerous. You've heard enough about it to know that, but you don't know everything. The police are trying to find out who is stirring up the trouble, but they've no idea at all. They must find out, before it grows too big and gets completely out of control. And I was asked to help them to find out.'

'How?' asked Juanita quickly. 'If I knew anything I would tell you. I don't, Nigel.'

'The police think you do,' Murray told her quietly. 'They think there will be other attempts to kill or to kidnap you. They haven't managed to capture anyone on the revolutionary side who knows anything. Do you know of a man named Mikolas?'

'I know a dozen, a hundred,' she said; 'it is as common in Canna as Smith is here.'

'A politician named Mikolas who comes from Cairo?'

'No, not a politician,' she said, and persuaded him that was the truth.

'Well, the police have no idea who the revolutionaries in England are, but if you are attacked again they think they can capture at least one of the assailants,' he told her. 'From there they might be able to get at the others.'

Would Craigie agree that he was doing the right thing? Would Loftus? Never mind what they thought; had he really been wise? He'd told her plainly that she was a bait, and felt quite sure that she would be quick to see all its implications.

She dropped on to the window-seat again. Murray stopped playing with the cigarette, seeing that he had rolled it round and round so much that the tobacco had spilled out at each end. He put it into an ashtray and took another cigarette and lit it, letting the flame of his lighter burn for a moment before putting it out.

'Did you come to tell me this?' Juanita asked quietly.

'I was asked to find out everything I could from you, and to get your help,' Murray told her, 'and was told that I could do whatever I thought best. I think this is the best way—for you to know what is needed so desperately, and to know how you can help.'

There was a long pause. Then:

'What I told you was true, Nigel,' Juanita said. She was paler now, and there was a different kind of brilliance in her eyes; he had seen something like it when she had realised that cottage was being attacked. 'Do you—do you really think it can help, if—if I am attacked again?'

'Yes,' Murray said.

She gave an involuntary little shiver.

He moved towards her and slid his arm round her shoulders, and quite suddenly she moved round, and pressed closely to him, her cheek against his breast, her fingers very tight about him. He held her firmly, and felt her shivering, and wondered if there was any real point in frightening her like this.

She looked up.

She had been crying, although he had not realised it. She seemed to be searching for some message in his eyes, and when he didn't speak, she asked him huskily:

'Is the trouble on Canna really so serious?'

'Nine people have died already,' Murray said, 'and if there is a general uprising, women and children will probably suffer badly, and the island—Juanita, *you* don't need telling what can happen. It could be disastrous to Canna itself, apart from its effect on us in England and on Western defence.'

'Yes,' she said slowly. I can see that. Yes.' She freed herself, and this time she seemed to become remote, as if she was seeing things which he could not see or even imagine. 'Yes,' she repeated, 'of course I will help in any way I can, but I do not know where my uncle is.'

At last he could question her freely now.

And he could wonder why her brother had tried to eavesdrop, too.

15. Man from the Island

Murray walked up the stone steps which led to the door of the Department Z office. This was the first time he had come here unescorted. Behind him was the picture of Juanita and the echo of her voice, and closer at hand, the sight of the men in the street, watching the little doorway which it was so easy to pass. The staircase struck cold, but that might be partly because he was suffering a sharp reaction from his mood of the morning. He could almost hear Juanita saying:

'I do not want to die.'

And he had been a party to taking desperate risks with her.

He stood at the first main landing, and ran his fingers under the hand-rail. He felt what seemed like a little crack in the wood, and pressed the nail of his forefinger into it. Immediately he heard a faint sigh of sound, and after a moment the wall slid back. It was better concealed than he had expected; he would not have dreamt that there was a door there had he not known.

It closed behind him, and he was trapped in the wall; but then the other door began to open.

Craigie was at a desk, and the armchairs were empty. Loftus wasn't here, but a fat man whom Murray hadn't seen before was pacing up and down. The opening of the door obviously interrupted what he was saying, and he brought a clenched fist down into an open palm.

' . . . hideous,' he said, 'I tell you . . .'

He stopped at a sign from Craigie, and looked round. Clearly, he was exasperated by the interruption.

Murray stepped into the room, quickly feeling the glow of the fire, which was much brighter than it had been yesterday. The door closed behind him. Craigie said: 'Hallo, Nigel,' and the other man glared, as if wishing him a long way on the other side of the door.

The stranger was short and very plump, with a big, full face, a nearly bald head which shimmered in the light of the room. He had big, heavy-lidded eyes, and a small mouth—an odd-looking individual, and yet the glitter in his eyes, the way he banged his fist into his palm, made him vitally, almost passionately alive. His beige-coloured suit was creased and crumpled, obviously made for hot weather, as obviously slept in.

'Matt, this is Nigel Murray,' Craigie said. 'Nigel, this is Matt Rondo, who's just come from the Island of Canna.'

Murray said: 'Oh,' heavily.

Rondo held out a plump hand; it was fleshy but it wasn't soft or even slightly flabby, but he seemed hardly to have time for such formalities, for he dropped Murray's hand after a quick clasp, and turned to Craigie; almost as if he turned on Craigie. The Chief of Department Z sat looking up at him, with that lined face and the wise eyes all very sombre then. Craigie moved his hand towards Murray, as if asking him to stand by and listen.

'. . . . glad to meet you; anyone in this fight is a friend,' Rondo said, in a kind of restrained boom, and then leaned heavily on Craigie's desk and looked into Craigie's eyes. 'I tell you it's hideous, Gordon; never seen anything like it in the whole of my life, and hope to God I never see anything like it again. *Hideous!'*

Murray thought: 'I wonder what he's talking about.'

Canna?

In profile, Matthew Rondo's face looked long and heavy, and his double chin quivered as he spoke, shaking his head in a kind of woeful emphasis.

'And I've seen a hell of a lot in that lifetime,' Rondo went on, still booming on a muted note, 'I was in Kenya, Malaya, Cyprus, but this—*this,'* he repeated, and then he was seized with a fit of coughing, and swung round and covered his mouth with his hand, placing his other hand on to his stomach as if the coughing hurt. When he recovered, his cheeks were flaming red and his eyes were watering, tears ran down his cheeks. 'Hideous, I tell you,' he went on, and Murray felt his own blood go chill. 'Children—slaughtered.'

Murray felt icy.

'Slaughtered,' repeated Rondo, in a voice now so hoarse that it seemed just a growl in his throat. 'Four hand grenades in a classroom. *Four.* It was just plain bloody murder. If I could get my hands round the neck of the swine who's behind it . . .' He broke off, to start coughing again, but this time he was not so helpless, although he kept trying to talk through the coughing. 'Nine dead. Three or four others so badly hurt they will probably come to wish they were dead. That's how these devils are fighting, and I tell you that until we find Meya Kamil or send overwhelming forces to Canna and *shoot* some sense into the swine, we'll have more and more trouble.'

He stopped, dabbed at his forehead, then looked round as if he wanted somewhere to sit. He began to shake. Murray knew the symptoms of collapse, and could only stand and look on, feeling something of the horror which affected this strange man. Then he moved quickly, pushing a chair up to Rondo, who dropped into it and dabbed with his handkerchief again. He had lost his colour; and Murray realised that he looked like a man who hadn't slept in days.

'Brandy in that cupboard,' Craigie said, with a glance at Murray.

'I'll get it.'

'Don't want brandy,' muttered Rondo. 'Don't want to do anything but forget. Craigie, I tell you—if you'd been there. If you'd seen . . .'

'How was it you were there?' asked Craigie, in a quiet, steadying voice.

'Heard that there had been some rabble rousing in the town,' Rondo said, 'Sifica, little town, up in the hills. Often been there. Your cable had asked for all possible details, and so I went to have a look. So did half-a-dozen newspaper correspondents, when this news breaks in the Press I wouldn't like to say what would happen.'

Murray opened the cupboard door. A heterogeneous mass of oddments faced him—bottles, some empty and some full, glasses, plates, oddments of packet food, a startling *melangerie* which would normally have made him gape. Now, he just looked for the brandy, and found a round, squat bottle of *Courvoisier,* and a small glass. He took them back to the desk, without missing a word of what Rondo said.

'. . . wouldn't be surprised if it wasn't put on for our benefit,' Rondo went on. 'Why the devil else should they throw hand grenades at *kids!* It was an open classroom, only three walls, little man of a teacher was making the kids laugh like one o'clock, never seen happier faces. And they *are* happy, these Cannans; left on their own they're the happiest people I know. Don't quote the Zulus and don't quote the Samoans to me, either; the Cannans are as happy as any and a damned sight more intelligent than some. And then . . .' He gulped, and dabbed his forehead

again. ‘Youth on a motor-cycle. Heard the thing, but didn’t give it a thought. One of the newspapermen was actually taking a cine; when that’s thrown on the screen . . .’

He broke off again.

Murray had poured out brandy.

‘Take some of this,’ he said, and thrust the glass forward.

Rondo looked at it as if he wondered what the interruption was all about, but he took the glass and swallowed as if he was drinking lemonade. ‘Er—well, that’s what they’re doing. Terrorism? It’s sheer, cold-blooded murder! They’ve learned everything from every other place where we’ve had trouble. It’s as plain as the nose on your face, Gordon—they had this campaign perfectly prepared, ready to blow up at the first touch of the fuse, and it’s blowing. I shouldn’t think we’ve more than three or four days to work in. If we don’t produce Meya Kamil and make sure the people understand that he’s still holding the reins, then— well, we won’t be able to put down this trouble without a civil war.’

He gulped again, and then leaned back and closed his eyes, as if he could see a horror which he wanted to shut out.

Murray asked, in a toneless voice:

‘Why should they massacre children?’

Now, Rondo had the answer.

‘Why? To hurt *us,* of course. To force our hand, quick. To make the whole island start screaming the same thing— give us Meya Kamil or get out. The ordinary decent folk will join in just to save their children and themselves. That’s the theme song—*Give us Meya Kamil or get out.* I’d never heard it until two days ago—just two *days.* Now it’s being chanted everywhere. Schools, university, buses, in road gangs, in mines, wherever you find a crowd with a lot of young people in it, it’s the same. “*Give us Meya Kamil or get out.”* And there are parcels of arms all over the island, the police have turned up hundreds of hand grenades and hundreds of guns already, nearly all of British make.’

Craigie echoed sharply: ‘British?’

‘That’s right—I’ve brought you samples, as you asked me to,’ Rondo went on, and he turned round towards the desk; close to it was a battered brown suitcase. He was so fat that he grunted as he bent down, and Murray said:

‘Let me.’

‘Eh? Oh, all right, thanks.’ Rondo sat back in his chair, and Murray went down on one knee and opened the case. Some soiled shirts and socks were on top, handkerchiefs, a towel and next a shaving kit in a battered leather case. Then wrapped in pyjamas, was a hand grenade, an automatic pistol, .32, several knives all stamped *Made in Sheffield, England,* and a few glass phials in a box and packed with cotton wool, as if to stop them from being shaken or knocking against each other. ‘Wouldn’t have got those through customs if you hadn’t phoned,’ Rondo said. ‘Well, there they are, if they’re any use; at least you’ll be able to find out where they’re made, and you might find who shipped them to Canna. The Island of Peace! The Good Man! I’d say that place is going to be Hell’s Island before you can turn round twice if we don’t do something *drastic.* It’s murder, and. . .’

‘All right, Matt,’ said Craigie, and when Rondo quietened, Craigie went on: ‘But you haven’t managed to get any line at all on the people behind it?’

‘Absolutely nothing at all,’ said Rondo bluntly. ‘Saw the other two agents before I left, too. Been working like beavers. So’ve the correspondents, killing themselves

on the job, but no—there isn't a line. Meya Kamil's vanished, and. . .'

He broke off again, dabbed his forehead, and then unexpectedly, he stood up. He was enormous and untidy, and in desperate earnest.

'That's the only key to it all,' he said in a thinner voice. 'Meya Kamil's vanished. Find him, put him back in command, and you will be all right. The people would calm down quickly enough then, everything depends on Meya Kamil. But if you ask me,' went on Rondo with a glumness which was very near despair, 'you won't be able to find him—alive, that is. They must have killed him before they started all this business, they wouldn't dare to stir it up unless they were sure he'd never come back.'

Craigie asked sharply: 'Have you any evidence that Meya Kamil's dead?'

'No, not evidence, but—well, I'm telling you what I think, Gordon. And I'm telling you what every newspaper correspondent, our two agents, and every British official on the island thinks. I haven't met anyone who has any doubt at all.'

Craigie said: 'I see. Well, Matt, you need some rest, and you know where to go. We'll do everything possible, and things might not be quite so black as they look. As soon as you've rested, put down everything you can in a written report, and I'll have it collected and analysed.'

'All right, Gordon,' Rondo said dispiritedly, 'I'll do whatever I can, but—sorry I lost my head. Every time I think of those kids, I feel as if I could run amok, preferably with a knife in each hand.'

'I know,' Craigie said. He stood up, walked to the other end of the room, and pressed a button in the mantelpiece— one of several built into it so that unless one knew they were there, they wouldn't be seen. 'A car will be outside in five minutes,' he went on, as he stopped ringing. 'One question, Matt. Have you see any of the black Canna spiders lately?'

Rondo said slowly: 'Well, no, I haven't seen any. Not alive, that is. I've seen a few dead ones, up near Siflca. Nasty brutes. And there's some kind of advertising campaign going on, there are a lot of leaflets being distributed with a picture of the spider on, a lot of puff about the produce of the spider being the best thing Canna ever had. I...'

He stopped abruptly.

'You mean, that's part of the *campaign*? Why, it's been going on for weeks, months probably, had a lot of funny— funny ha-ha I mean—stuff, too. Up came the spider and sat down beside her kind of jingle. It's printed verses and limericks—they love limericks on the island—that kind of thing. I thought—*everyone* thought—it was one of these build-up to a climax kind of advertisements for cigarettes or beer. Why, I kept several, they struck me as being worth showing!' He bent down by the desk, where his case stood unlocked and with the key in it. He opened the case and began to rummage among the clothes, and the others glanced at each other, Murray with a deeper understanding of this tragedy than he had yet had.

'How did you get on?' Craigie asked Murray.

'If you can call it getting on, all right,' Murray said. 'I should think you can count on Juanita's help. I told her . . .'

He broke off, in sudden, fierce alarm.

He saw Matthew Rondo leap away from the case, as if he had been rocked back with a blow. And while he was still moving, Rondo gave a shrill, piercing cry of pain. He shook his right hand wildly, and staggered backwards, lost his balance and toppled, and the others were too late to save him. He crashed down, cracking his

head on the floor, and as he lay quivering a little black shape scuttled out of the suitcase and then about Craigie's desk, stopping at one edge, feeling about with its front legs, swinging round and rushing to another edge as if he couldn't wait to bite again.

And Rondo was groaning.

16. The Bait

It was half an hour before the office was back to normal; or nearly normal. There was still a bloodstain, turning brown now, where the blood had dropped from Rondo's finger, after Craigie had cut open the spot where the spider had bitten the man, and squeezed the poison out. Rondo had lost consciousness within five minutes, and in spite of the speed with which Craigie and Murray had worked, his finger had swollen to twice its normal size before the doctor had arrived—a different man from the one whom Murray had seen the previous day.

After first aid, Rondo had been carried out, to an ambulance. There was no certainty that he would ever regain consciousness. The spider, crushed with a heavy book, had been preserved so that it could be dissected, and any poison remaining extracted and analysed.

Now, Craigie was standing with his back to the fireplace, looking only slightly harassed and careworn, but nowhere near panic.

'You were saying that you told Juanita Lang . . .' he reminded Murray.

Murray was pulling hard at a cigarette.

'I hope you'll agree that it was the best thing to do,' he said. 'I told her that we could hide her away so that she couldn't be found or put in danger, but that if she was attacked while at Hampstead—or anywhere else for that matter—we'd probably be able to catch her assailant, and we desperately needed a prisoner.'

'How did she take it?'

Murray drew harder at the cigarette. He couldn't turn away from Craigie, whose grey eyes seemed to compel him to look into them; but he took his time answering, because he wanted to make sure that he said exactly the right thing.

At last he tossed the cigarette into the fire, and said:

'I think you would say that she took it well. She was frightened, badly frightened. She doesn't relish the idea at all, and knows that it's a big risk that might prove fatal. But I think she thought it out before promising that she'd help. Probably a sense of duty plus a kind of compulsion— in fact I should say that as Juanita Lang she rebelled against the very idea, she thought she'd had enough, but as the niece of Meya Kamil, she decided that she must go through with it. And I think she will,' Murray added with quiet deliberation. 'But she still maintains that she had no idea where her uncle is. She knew he was worried, she knew that he'd made secret plans for her to leave, but no one else knew, or so Meya Kamil thought. The rebels found out, of course. Then she says he went to his room one night, just to pray—and she didn't see him again. He'd made her promise to go to the airport at a certain day and time, and she went.'

Murray paused.

'That squares with Rondo's report,' Craigie said. 'Meya Kamil walked out of his home and vanished. Two of our men were watching, but he shook them off. The town near his home is a rabbit warren, and it was easy.'

'You mean, he *meant* to go?'

'Rondo thought so, but we don't know,' said Craigie. 'Well now—you were quite right to say what you did to Juanita,' he went on, as if that hardly needed saying. 'What else?'

Murray told him about the English twin cousins, and about Charles Lang. He

spent much more time talking about Lang than about the twins or Juanita's aunt. He could still picture the handsome, arrogant face of Meya Kamil's nephew, in striking contrast to the gentle face of the man in the photograph on Craigie's desk.

'I think that's the lot,' he went on.

'Is it?' asked Craigie quietly.

'Yes, I think so. The thing that shook me most, apart from what I had to say to the girl, was that spider. The thing came from the outside, almost as if it knew where to go.'

'It probably did,' said Craigie dryly, 'there was honey on the carpet of the hall, or on the door where the creature stopped—I've had a report from Harrison, from the house. The spiders can smell honey a long way off. There was a little on the doorstep and more in the hall; there's no doubt what drew it in.'

'How did the honey get there?' Murray asked abruptly.

'It could have been in the garden for days,' said Craigie, 'or it could have dropped out of a passing car, and been carried in by someone who trod on it. The house and the grounds are being searched in case there are more spiders.'

'Well, you certainly don't miss much,' Murray said, 'but . . .'

'Nigel,' Craigie interrupted, 'there's something you haven't told me.'

Murray considered. Then: 'I don't think so.'

'Sure?' asked Craigie.

His gaze was very direct, and more than ever Murray had a sense of being in the presence of greatness. He did not think that he would ever be able to understand it, but it was as if the Chief of Department Z was probing into his inner consciousness, willing him to speak of something which he could not even recall. Had he forgotten anything? He stood there, half frowning, and then Craigie went on with a twist of his full lips:

'How do you feel about the girl?'

Murray said heavily: 'Oh. I see. I hadn't realised . . .'

'I know,' said Craigie. 'Personal feelings wouldn't normally be in a report, but they could make a vital difference.'

'I suppose so,' Murray agreed, and found it surprisingly easy to talk; it was almost as if this had been on his mind, and he was anxious to talk about it, and so get it off. 'I think I can say I've never felt quite the same about anyone, at any time. She—well, I suppose it's a kind of infatuation. If she was anything other than a young girl, I'd say she was *femme fatale,* but with Juanita, that's . . .' He paused, seeking the right word.

Craigie said: 'Unthinkable?'

Murray didn't answer.

He couldn't explain the attraction which the girl had for him, simply had to accept the fact that it was there. It had been, almost from the beginning. He could not get her, or her danger, out of his mind. He was desperately anxious that she should not die, as anxious that she should not suffer, and as he tried to examine his thoughts and his feelings, he knew that she was in some ways more important than anything he had yet heard about.

Then, he could picture that open classroom, the laughing

Children . . . 'I suppose you mean, if I'm with her and we're attacked, would I go for the assailant first, or would I concentrate on saving her?'

'That's what I mean,' agreed Craigie.

Murray found himself lighting another cigarette. He didn't answer for some time,

because it was absolutely essential to tell Craigie what he really felt, not what he would like to feel. It would be easy to take the heroic mood: 'Oh, I would go for the assailant.' But would he? Face it in cold blood: when the moment of crisis came and he had the choice between saving Juanita Lang or catching her assailant, what would he do?'

'I don't know,' he said abruptly. 'I'd rather not have to put it to the test.'

'Fair enough,' Craigie said. There seemed much more in the two words than that; he seemed to be saying that he asked nothing more of Murray but this searching honesty. 'I'll try to make sure you're not put to it. But Juanita Lang is much more likely to talk to you than to anyone else. What we have to know,' went on Craigie, going up and down on his toes as he roasted his back at the fire, 'is every trifling thing she can possibly tell us. Every minute detail. There isn't a better man than you to find out. Get her talking. Remember it doesn't matter how far she goes back. Find out her opinion of Meya Kamil himself, of his relations—her own brother, for instance. It's almost a case for psychiatry, but she wouldn't be likely to respond to the ordinary consultant. So get her talking, and lead her up to the events of the last few weeks as soon as you can. Just how her uncle behaved, why she believed that he was in danger, whom did he see recently, were there any strangers, were there any letters—and don't worry whether what you learn seems relevant. Over there'—Craigie pointed to one of the cabinets near his desk—'we have several hundred reports from agents on Canna and the nearer places in the Middle East. I've studied them all, and they're indexed so that I can turn one up in a moment or two. You might be able to pass on some trifle of information from Juanita Lang which seems irrelevant to you, but when I get it, might tie in with something you don't know about. In that way you could help us to get a clearer picture, perhaps the answer we need.'

'I'll do what I can,' Murray promised.

'I know you will,' Craigie said, 'and you know how desperately urgent it is.'

Murray nodded, abruptly.

'Good,' said Craigie, and then went out briskly, as if something that had happened in the past hour or two had taken away much of his fatigue, 'and I think you'll have to make sure that Juanita appreciates the urgency, too. I'd heard about the school outrage by radio, some time before Rondo arrived. The film taken by a news unit which was touring Canna is being flown here, and I hope to have copies this evening. Juanita had better see one projected.'

Murray said: 'Yes, all right.'

'I should go and see her again in the middle of the afternoon,' Craigie said. 'There's a family conference of some kind going on. Charles Lang is probably arguing that she must be sent away, out of all possible danger.'

'What would happen if he persuaded her to go?'

Craigie said simply: 'We'd have to stop her. We don't want to, mind you, and when you've talked to her again. . .'

'I can't promise to make a girl stay in a place where she will probably be murdered,' Murray said roughly. 'I can try, but. . .'

He broke off.

Something happened which he hadn't seen before. A green light flashed in the carved surround of the mantelpiece. The light was about the size of a sixpenny piece, and it winked on and off half-a-dozen times. Craigie noticed it, probably because there was a faint buzzing sound all the time that it was flashing. Then it

went out, and the spot where it had been seemed just like part of the carving on the mantelpiece.

'That's Loftus,' Craigie said. 'He's been checking on a few things about Cannan people in England, particularly on the group who were at Cliff House. We found another place where they'd been, near Weymouth—that's where the Spitfire came from. But they'd all disappeared. Do you know how long they'd been in Cliff House?'

'Only a week or two,' Murray answered. 'The Abbotts were there during the summer, they were resting after their long tour, and I gather that they left at the end of September. They put it in the hands of an agent to try and let it furnished for the winter, and he let it for three months. I'd already leased the cottage, which once seemed my good luck.'

'And was ours,' Craigie said mildly.

By then, the door in the wall was sliding open, and Loftus was stepping through.

He was so large that when the door was opened at its widest, he had to turn sideways, they had had a lot of trouble getting Rondo out of the office to the ambulance. But it wasn't Loftus's size, or his rumpled clothes with the cigarette ash smeared everywhere, or his ruffled hair which caught and held Murray's attention. It was the sombre look in his eyes, and the way his face was set.

The door slid to behind him.

He looked at Craigie, and seemed not to have noticed Murray, which in itself was strange. Murray felt as if he were stifling. He sensed that something as bad as that which Rondo had reported was coming; he seemed hardly to have time to breathe, things piled up so quickly. If this was the speed with which things were happening on the Island of Canna then the chance of saving the situation seemed to get more remote every hour.

Then, Loftus said:

'Ned's dead.'

Ned?

'Oh,' said Craigie, and seemed to flinch.

Murray studied them, first Loftus, then Craigie.

When Craigie had heard of the attack on the children, he had not looked anything like so shaken as he did now. Loftus had lost all his colour, and there was a glitter in his eyes which Murray hadn't seen before; a murderous look. They were utterly still for what seemed an age.

Ned?

Oundle, of course. Ned Oundle!

Murray's thoughts flashed back to the cottage, the Spitfire, the falling 'ball'—and to Oundle exposing himself to the flames so that he could protect the girl. He had not paused or hesitated for a moment, it had not even occurred to him to try to save himself at the cost of her life; and he could have done so easily.

Then Loftus said abruptly:

'Sorry, Nigel. Ned Oundle's been with the Department for over twenty years.'

Murray didn't speak.

'Twenty years,' repeated Loftus in a savage voice, 'and he was going to retire at the end of this year. If I'd had my way, he would have retired a year ago. Now, his wife and those two boys. . .'

Murray wanted to shout: 'Don't go on, don't torture yourself,' yet he could only stand dumb and watch the pair, and feel something of the emotion going through

their minds —grief and loss, and hatred for the people who had done this thing to a man who was their friend.

'Well,' Craigie said at last, 'we'd better get on.' He spoke very slowly, as if really he wanted to do nothing but stand there and let his mind roam over the past. But when the effort was made, he went on more briskly: 'Was Rondo at the hospital when you went to see Ned?'

'Yes.'

'Any . . .'

'He was dead on arrival,' Loftus said. 'Those insects pack quite a bite.' The rough edge was harsh and ugly in his voice. 'I gather that he managed to say his piece before he was bitten by the brute.'

'Yes, said Craigie, 'and I want to compare notes with you. Nigel knows what he's going to do, now.' He smiled at Murray, quickly, absently, then pressed another button in the carving, and the door slid open.

Murray stepped out.

He went quietly down the stairs and into the street, and a gust of wind caught his hat and nearly blew it from his head. He grabbed it. He saw the men on duty, and yet remembered how quickly the other side had discovered that he was at Dineley Street, so that even though there was no report that the little door was being watched, he could not feel safe. And he could not be sure that even now he was being used by Craigie as a bait. His car—the Jaguar—was parked on the Embankment, and he walked that way. He wasn't followed. There weren't many people about here, and most who were clutched at their hats, and some of the women at their skirts, as the wind off the river blew gustily. It was much colder, and in the distance there were dark snow clouds.

There was never snow on Canna.

A news-van passed, with a placard pasted on the side; *Terrorists Kill 9 Children.* That would send a shiver of horror through the whole of the country, and. . .

He made himself change his thoughts. It was nearly one o'clock. He had some three hours to kill, and in that time he had to have lunch. He thought of Jane Wyatt and her lamb stew, and wondered if she was in, and whether she would expect him to lunch. It would be worth finding out. He reached the car, as another gust of wind came off the river, and this time lifted his hat off his head. He turned round to grab it, and missed. He chased it, feeling silly, as it kept dodging out of reach, but he rescued it, dusted it off, but didn't put it on again. He opened the door of the car and dropped the hat on to the seat next to the driver's, and started to get in. The hat fell on to the floor, and as it did so, it disturbed something which scuttled toward's Murray's foot, which was already inside the car.

Murray snatched his foot away; and had to clench his teeth to stop from crying out.

The spider didn't touch him.

It reached the edge of the car, and felt gingerly over with one of its legs, and Murray could see it more clearly than ever before, each leg, the eyes the hard shell-like back. It crept over the edge.

He slammed the door on it.

'Ugh!' he muttered, and stood quite still, with fingers on the handle, staring down as if he couldn't believe that he had killed it. Then he began to open the door, but he wondered if there were any more spiders.

He searched the car, and found none, but couldn't be *sure.*

Someone had dropped the deadly thing into the car, knowing that it was his. Two men had died within an hour of being bitten by one of the spiders, and more of them might appear out of the blue, anywhere and any time. They could be put almost anywhere, too—through letter-boxes, windows, doors—at the house at Hampstead, his flat, his car, on a bus, anywhere that he might be; and anywhere that Juanita might be, also.

He still stood by the side of the car. Traffic passed noisily, and the wind blew more steadily.

Slowly, he opened the door again and stepped in.

He should have seen the truth from the beginning, of course, but it did not dawn upon him until now. Craigie's men could catch a hundred spiders alive, and they would not help to trace the conspirators. And if the spiders were the only weapons of attack to be used against Juanita, then it might be that the rebels were offering her as a sacrifice, with no real hope of getting nearer the truth by her death.

Was that right?

Or was he trying to evade the issue; was his reluctance to put Juanita in danger really behind that argument?

He didn't know.

He drove to Dineley Street, left the car outside, and then went up in the lift, and as he did so he looked about him, conscious of the danger, half fearful that a spider would appear in the lift, in the roof...

The ceiling?

He glanced upwards, quickly. It was a plain walnut ceiling, with no place on the shiny surface for a creature to hide, but the fact that he had reacted so sharply was an indication of his frame of mind.

The lift stopped.

He scanned the landing, the edges of the carpet, and the flight of stairs; and he shuddered again. This way, it would soon become an obsession. He was in no mood to talk to Jane for he would give his state of jitters away too easily. He let himself into his own flat, and began a search which he told himself was crazy, and which he also told himself was the only thing to do. He found nothing, but couldn't be *sure* no spiders were here. He tried to recall what he knew about the habits of the creatures, and remembered reading somewhere that their favourite hiding-place was in warm, soft things. Clothes, socks, handkerchiefs. He had to clench his teeth when he went into the bedroom. Using a spare shoe-tree, he turned his shoes over, and then shook them; nothing fell out. Then he went through his clothes, and found nothing, but it was impossible to search every cranny.

There was ham, butter, bread, everything he needed for a meal, inside the larder. He would be much better on his own. He cut off some ham, smeared bread with butter, and ate hurriedly, glancing about him all the time. His nerves were usually pretty good; so if this affected him like this, how badly would people with weaker nerves feel?

Like Juanita.

It was half-past two, and he still had an hour to waste. He jumped up suddenly, and went across to Jane Wyatt's flat. The bell rang more sharply than he had intended. He wondered if she was having an afternoon nap; women often did, and she had been almost as busy as he, the previous day. But no, she came to the door at once, and opened it a crack, recognised him, and opened it wider.

‘Hallo, Nigel. Come in.’ She seemed pleased to see him.

‘Thanks,’ he said, and went in—and glanced down, to make sure that no insect scuttled in with him. The door closed. He stood looking at Jane, and she waited without speaking; the very presence of her helped to settle his nerves.

‘Jane, I’m crazy,’ he said abruptly. ‘I just want to talk. . .’

So, he talked—of his doubts and his fears and the thing which was becoming an obsession, and Jane listened without interrupting. Somehow the burden was easier to bear, and he knew that he must go on with it all.

He reached the house in Hampstead at one minute to four.

17. Charles Lang

This time, Charles Lang opened the door.

Murray had little doubt that the man knew whom to expect; even less doubt that the antagonism in Lang's eyes was more noticeable than before. The man stood aside for him to enter, nodding but not speaking, and Murray remembered the photograph of Meya Kamil on Craigie's desk, and the likeness was more striking than ever—except that in one was arrogance, and in the other, older man, a great humility.

Murray said pleasantly: 'Is Juanita here?'

'She is resting,' Lang said, 'and I wish to talk to you before you see her.'

Murray said: 'Yes, of course.'

'In here, please,' said Lang, and opened the door of the front room, which Murray hadn't seen before. It was gloomy, for the Venetian blinds were down, but he could see the heavy, Victorian furniture, one large mirror over the fireplace, pictures hanging from picture-rails on the wall. Lang did not put on the light, but stood aside for Murray to enter, and Murray said:

'Mind if we have more light?'

'If you wish, but . . .' Lang didn't finish as he snapped the switches down.

Murray found himself glancing about everywhere, particularly on the floor, and yet it was a portrait which caught his eye. It was specially lighted, and the light came on with the main switch.

It was of Meya Kamil.

The photograph had been good, and lifelike; this painting was masterly. The old, pale face, the wispy white hair, the look of great compassion in the blue eyes, were all unmistakable, and even as he looked at it Murray found himself thinking not of Meya Kamil, but of the Good Man of Canna.

When he looked back at Charles Lang, he thought that he saw the trace of a sneer on the supercilious lips. Yet there were the fears of the spiders, and he could not free himself of them.

'Sit down,' said Lang, 'and . . .'

'Thanks, I'll stand.'

'Very well.' Lang stood half-way inside the room, with the bright ceiling light shining on his head, and casting faint shadows from his jutting black eyebrows, over his eyes; it put the eyes into a kind of shadow, and yet they seemed very brilliant; glittering. He did not move, and he had the oriental's trick of stillness, although in speech he was often more colloquial and much less formal than Juanita.

'My aunt and cousins left the house until this is over,' he announced abruptly. 'They are too frightened to stay.'

Murray didn't speak.

'I have been trying to persuade my sister to leave also,' Lang said, 'but she refuses to go because you have made her think that she might be able to help to find my uncle.'

'And so she might.' Murray felt his temper rising.

'You know that it is not true,' said Lang; 'you know that the old man is dead.'

Murray didn't speak, but watched the other very closely. It was quite a face to

study, with the piercing eyes and the jutting chin, the lips parted slightly now, and showing the strong white teeth; there was the dominant, hooked nose with the nostrils slightly distended because of the man's tension. Lang stood with his hands in front of his waist, as if he longed for a belt into which to rest his thumbs. He was an inch or two taller than Murray, and a much larger man; and it passed through Murray's mind that he might attack.

Was Harrison here?

No one else seemed to be in the house, but Murray made out the figure of a man in the front garden; undoubtedly one of Craigie's agents.

Murray said, very quietly: 'So you think your uncle is dead.'

'Of course he is.'

'I should very much like to meet the man who killed him,' Murray said softly. 'How do you know . . .'

'If you are trying to suggest that I may have had something to do with his death, you are just being fanciful,' Lang said impatiently. 'Did you know him?' That was abruptly challenging.

'Only by reputation.'

'Then you should know that if it were possible for him to reappear, to save Canna from disaster, he. . .'

'He could be dead, or he could have been kidnapped.'

'I am sure that he is dead,' Lang said.

'You can't be sure. Or—*can* you?'

There was another long pause, and during it Lang lowered his hands, then turned towards the window, as if for a few moments he could not look at Murray. He began to speak while he was still looking away, and there was a different note in his voice; of resignation, almost of despair. He spoke more pedantically, too.

'How can I make you understand that I know this thing? How can I make it clear?' He pressed the tips of his long fingers against his forehead, as if calling upon some hidden strength to help him answer his own questions. His uncle was a mystic; did he believe that he was, too?

Was he one?

He turned to face Murray, lowering his hands.

'The impossible task is to make you think like me, feel like me, understand as I understand,' he said in a deep tragic voice. 'Isn't it time that you realised that the East and the West *cannot* understand each other?' When Murray didn't answer, he went on more quickly: 'I can *feel* that he is dead. It is in the atmosphere and it is within me; I *know.'*

'When did you first find out?' asked Murray dryly.

'I have known for days, I. . .'

'Now listen, Lang,' Murray said abruptly. 'I can guess how you feel about Juanita. That's fine, of itself. I don't think you can guess how I feel, but I'd cut off my right hand rather than harm her, and . . .'

Lang interrupted him quickly, eagerly, almost unbelievingly. He moved forward, as if he was anxious to look into Murray's eyes, and so read the truth. He actually gripped Murray's shoulders as he asked in a strained voice:

'What is she to you?'

'She isn't anything to me,' Murray answered deliberately. 'I doubt is she ever will be, but I tell you that I would rather have my right hand cut off than allow anything to happen to her. And I would rather know that I was going to die tomorrow than let

Canna be taken over by the terrorists.'

The pressure of the man's fingers on his shoulders increased so much that it began to hurt. Lang didn't move. His eyes were very close to Murray's and their intensity had a kind of metallic brightness, a glitter which seemed a reflection of some fire. And he was taller, remember. Stronger? He seemed to be trying to influence Murray simply by staring at him, seemed to think that he could hypnotise him; and Murray felt the influence of those eyes and of the pressure of the powerful fingers, fought against it—and wondered how deeply it might affect some men.

'Murray, why don't you tell your masters that Meya Kamil isn't the only man who can save the island?' Lang cried. '*I* can. If the islanders were told the truth, that he is dead and that he named me to succeed him, then all would be well.'

Well, one thing had come into the open, anyhow; he was a man with dazzling visions of his own greatness.

Murray said quietly: 'Did your uncle ever talk about you succeeding him?'

Lang didn't answer.

Murray went on: 'You can't seriously believe that the people would accept you or anyone else as a substitute.'

But—*did* young Lang really believe in himself as heavensent?

'If the English Government sponsored me, they would have to,' Lang said. He spoke almost venomously, and there was a bubbling of froth at the corners of his mouth. 'Only that is needed, nothing else at all. If the Colonial Office will nominate me as Meya Kamil's successor, I can take over the island at once, and the people will follow me as loyally as they followed my uncle. Go and tell your masters that, go and . . .'

He stopped, abruptly.

The pressure at Murray's shoulders eased, and it was not difficult to shrug himself free. Murray backed away a little, for he felt uncomfortably close to the man. Thoughts were flashing through his mind like lights in the street as a car passed swiftly by, illuminating different things. This man really believed in himself, there was a touch of megalomania, perhaps a genuine mysticism, perhaps a kind of madness. If Charles Lang believed that he could save the island, if he believed that he had a divine right to succeed to his uncle, then he might be behind the terrorism, he might have decided to kill the old man, and then hold Great Britain to ransom.

What was the thing to do?

Call him a liar, call him a fool, call him a murderer?

Or, encourage him?

18. Desire

Lang moved away from Murray, slowly, putting his hands up to his face. Then he turned towards the window and stared out, and his pose was almost laughable; here was a tragicomedy, pathetic because there might be a measure of genuine belief in what he said. He was behaving now as if he realised that there was no way of persuading anyone to heed him seriously.

He said, in a husky voice: 'And I could save my people.'.

My people.

Murray didn't speak, but moved forward; he believed that Lang was watching him out of the corner of his eye, trying to see if he'd made any impression. Perhaps this was nothing but pose, and the man was behaving simply for effect. Murray drew within a yard of him, and then spoke softly.

'Do you really believe you can?'

Lang lowered his hands slowly.

'What is the use of talking? I have told you . . .'

'Listen to me,' Murray said, in a sharper voice, and he seemed to be badly shaken. 'How long have you lived on the island? How well do the islanders know you?'

'As they know no one else but Meya Kamil!'

'When were you last there?'

'I am there most of the time, I came here only because my uncle sent me here.'

Whether that was true or not did not seem important now. The important thing was to fool Lang, to make him believe that at least he, Murray thought that there might be something in this claim to being Meya Kamil's successor. It would keep Lang on a piece of string at least long enough to give Craigie time to test this new angle, time to deliberate and to decide what it was best to do.

'Did he know you hoped to succeed him?'

'He wanted me to,' Lang said, and suddenly his eyes were bright and his voice was eager. 'Why did he take me with him most places that we went? Why did he always consult me on matters of policy?'

'Did he do that?'

'Of course he did!'

'Lang,' said Murray, and he looked at the man with rounded eyes, as if he was beginning to see the real significance and the tremendous possibilities of this revelation, 'before you do anything at all, even before you speak to your sister, let me talk to my superiors. It won't take long. You might have told me something they didn't know about, this might . . .'

'Go and talk to them!' Lang cried. 'Go and tell them what I say, that I can save Canna whether they believe it or not. I know that Meya Kamil is dead, I can *feel* that he is dead and that he is willing me to go to Canna so as to save the people.'

Murray said, as if hoarsely: 'All right. I'll see what I can do.'

Then, he saw something which he hadn't noticed before, and which he was quite sure that Lang hadn't seen. The door was ajar. He saw no shadow, and instinctively he found himself glancing down at the floor, for there was room for spiders to squeeze in. Nothing moved. He told himself that this was probably the morning in reverse, with Juanita listening.

There was a glowing light in Lang's dark eyes.

'Then hurry,' he said.

'Yes,' said Murray, acting as if he did not quite know what he was saying, or what to do; as a man might behave if he had seen a vision. 'Yes, I'll talk to them, but—I came here to see Juanita.'

'She will be here when you come back.'

Murray said: 'Yes. Yes, of course, but—listen, Mr. Lang.' He paused just long enough for respect in that 'Mr.' to register on the other's mind, and to add a little to the sense of overweening self-importance. 'You know how necessary it is to carry out orders. I am here to talk to your sister; if. . .'

'Then talk to her! Hurry.'

'Yes, I will,' said Murray, and went on thickly: 'I think if I took her with me back to town, we could talk on the way, that would save time, and. . .'

'Do what you like,' said Charles Lang, in a resonant voice, 'but hurry.'

It seemed as if he was trying to look like a man inspired. And he had shown how little he cared for his sister.

Juanita was outside the door, and she made no attempt to conceal the fact that she had been listening. Murray could not quite understand her expression as he closed the door, and then took her arm. He suspected that Lang was likely to stand in that trance-like exaltation for some time, there was no desperate haste, and he hadn't had time to decide what best to do.

'Will you come with me?' he asked Juanita.

'Yes. I told you that I would do whatever you thought best.'

'Will you come at once?'

'Of course,' she said, 'I need just a few minutes to put on a hat and coat, but . . .' She hesitated, eyed him thoughtfully, and then turned and walked quickly up the stairs. She made little sound, and he watched her, feeling a tightening at his breast at sight of the slender beauty of her legs, at the way she walked, at the way she carried herself.

Regally.

He heard a door open and glanced round, and Harrison looked out, smiling.

'You got the Big Shot going nicely,' he said approvingly; 'I've got a little mike fixed up, tape-recorder and all that kind of thing, and we've a record. Good show!' He kept his voice low, but his eyes gleamed, as if he was really enthusiastic. 'But you don't want to cut things too short with Juanita. If you can woo her into a mood to talk, you might be sorry if you had to break off. So I'll send the tape to the office. It will speak for itself.'

'Fine,' Murray said. 'Do that soon, please.'

'Like a shot. Between you and me,' the Department Z agent went on brightly, 'I've had my eye on Charley Boy for a long time—since I first came here, in fact. There's the dictator in embryo for you, the man who believes that he has a mission to rule, and that nothing he does or says or even thinks can be wrong. Divine inspiration, blah, blah. Mind you, mine not to reason why, mine just to keep fit and spry. Like to telephone the office and tell them what you're doing? She'll be five minutes at least,' he added; 'you might think that she's a sweet and simple maid, but she knows no lady goes out without make-up. Yes?'

'Thanks,' said Murray.

He was glad to talk to Craigie; glad of the confirmation that he could trust Harrison implicitly; glad that Craigie had said:

'You might have something, Nigel. Keep at it.'

Murray rang off, and went back into the hall. Harrison was there, carrying a small attache case, presumably the tape recorder. He went outside when Murray arrived, and Murray was alone in the hall when Juanita came down.

She walked slowly.

She was pulling on a pair of kid-skin gloves, and it was almost as if she was doing that so that she could come slowly, and impress him. She wore a coat like Jane Wyatt's of leopard skin, with a wide-brimmed hat to match; her shoes were trimmed with fur.

He watched each step, and his heart hammered.

He did not speak when she reached the hall, but turned with her, and led the way to the door. Harrison was coming in briskly, and he missed a step when he saw this vision of Juanita, but all he said was:

'See you later.'

They went out.

It wasn't until Murray saw the small car which started up after them, that he realised how utterly the girl had taken possession of him. For that moment, he had forgotten the danger to *her.*

He wouldn't again.

He drove slowly, knowing that he had to make sure that the other Department Z driver could keep him in sight. He knew that this was the beginning of the fatal trap —that Juanita was more vulnerable than ever now; that the spiders did not present the only danger.

His mood of sharp self-approach faded as he glanced at her. She wasn't smiling, and did not appear to be glancing about her, just looked ahead without any apparent fear. She was still fiddling with her gloves, too, smoothing out wrinkles.

Murray had a feeling that she had become utterly unapproachable. The na'ivete, frailty and the candour were qualities which had faded, and a new unassailability had been put on, as a coat.

She had been wise to wrap up well. The clouds were over the whole of the sky now, the wind was blowing more fiercely, and there seemed to be a little rain in the air.

Murray headed for Dineley Street, and they were in Regent Street before they spoke of more than trifles; then Juanita said:

I have been making myself think of every little thing that my uncle told me in recent weeks.'

'Fine,' said Murray awkwardly. 'That's fine. Anything new?'

'I can't think of anything. Looking back, I know he was badly worried, perhaps frightened, but at the time I thought he was just tired, because he worked so hard.'

Murray glanced at her; she seemed to mean exactly what she said. He crawled behind a large van, making sure that the little escort car was still behind them, but the chances of an attack out here were very slight. If there was danger, it would come when he reached the cul-de-sac; or even when he got upstairs to his flat.

He had room to park outside the hotel.

He helped Juanita out, and they stepped towards the entrance of Number 5, but before they stepped inside, Juanita exclaimed:

'Look! Look!'

He spun round, fearing . . .

There was no need for fear. Juanita had caught sight of a newpaper 'boy' a man of sixty or more, who was coming out of the house next door with his newspapers under his arm, and a placard fluttering about his legs, reading: *New Outrage. Children murdered.*

'In Canna?' Juanita asked huskily, as if she was afraid of what the answer would be.

'Yes,' said Murray. 'It's getting worse every day.'

Every hour.

As they went up in the lift, he began to feel that it would not be necessary to show her the film; she would tell him everything she knew, without that. The way she had reacted jolted him out of the mood which had been so dangerous. He knew that the little escort car had passed the end of the street. His flat, as well as Jane Wyatt's, would be closely watched. Craigie wouldn't let *another* Cannan be in there, would he? He wouldn't try the same trick again.

Jane's door was closed.

Murray unlocked the door of his own flat, then glanced down, clutched by the fear of danger from those scuttling little brutes. He tried to tell himself that 'they' would probably use some other kind of weapon now; but they hadn't against Juanita, there had been no attempt at all to stop her from coming with him.

Juanita looked about her as he took her coat and gloves, but made no comment. Murray went to the kitchen and put a kettle on, and when he came back, she was smiling more freely than she had at any time today. She had shaken her gleaming hair free of the flattening pressure of the hat, too, and all hint of sophistication had gone; she was the eager, lovely *girl.*

'What's funny?' Murray asked.

'Oh, not funny, Nigel! Nice. You always seem to be making tea or coffee for me; you're so very domesticated. I like that.' She looked round the flat again, and went on: 'I like this, too. How long have you lived here?'

'Not long.'

She looked at him as though she wanted to say something but couldn't bring herself to speak, and Murray couldn't make himself look away from her. He remembered every sentence of his talk with Craigie, remembered the way he himself had brought out the phrase '*femme fatale'.* She was sitting on the couch, with her glorious eyes half hidden by the sweeping lashes, and with her lips parted a fraction; he couldn't see her teeth. She wore a bright green dress, beautifully cut, and with a deep, plunging neckline.

He had a job to do.

There were children, slaughtered; men and women murdered; countless others in danger. There were great issues at stake. Perhaps at this moment the Minister for Colonial Affairs was being evasive in the House, perhaps at this moment there were hurried consultations in Downing Street. Perhaps Craigie was getting more messages. Perhaps more men were dying, like Oundle, like Rondo. All these things were possible, and yet the outside world was a million miles away.

Did Juanita know what she was doing to him?

Was she deliberately making him lose his head?

It wasn't easy. A dozen women had tried, and hadn't succeeded, so far he'd been woman-proof. Woman-proof! He wanted to kiss her, to hold, to possess her. He stared into her face, every nerve on edge, not knowing what would happen if he

gave way to this almost irresistible desire.

He had to make her talk, and to remember.

Remember.

19. Juanita Remembers

‘Nigel,’ Juanita asked quietly, ‘did you believe my brother?’

Murray had not been thinking about her brother; had felt as if he was losing his very identity and all his power of will in the all-embracing beauty of Juanita Lang. She seemed to absorb and to engulf him. Yet there was the simple candour of her blue eyes, back again now, and she seemed unaware of the seductive softness of her shoulders, of the swell of her breasts, of the way her lips were parted as she looked at him.

Her words were like a douche of cold water.

‘Did I believe him about what?’ he asked, and turned round almost angrily, needing an excuse to avoid facing her, and stepped towards a box of cigarettes on a coffee table.

‘Anything,’ Juanita said.

‘I didn’t know what to believe,’ Murray told her. He put a cigarette to his lips and lit it, then turned round. He was able to look at her quite steadily, after all, but kept his distance. ‘How much of it was true?’

‘Nothing,’ said Juanita, very simply.

She could be devastating; and she was, as she damned her brother quite calmly and almost sweetly; she actually smiled a little.

‘You mean, he didn’t go about with Meya Kamil?’ Murray demanded.

‘Sometimes he went with my uncle, visiting different parts of the island, but it was always because he asked to go, and Meya Kamil did not like to refuse. Unless you knew him, you could not even begin to believe the kindness of Meya Kamil’s nature. He knew that Charles was very anxious and he tried to help, but he also knew that Charles had no judgement. I am quite sure that he would not regard Charles as the right person to succeed him.’

‘Did he name anyone at all?’ Murray asked abruptly.

‘No, not to me,’ said Juanita. ‘He was very . . .’ She paused as if seeking the precise words, then went on very slowly, and thoughtfully: ‘He was very lonely, Nigel. Few people understood him, few people knew what a strain he lived under. There were so many differences of opinion among the politicians, so many people to conciliate. Outwardly Canna was very contented, but underneath there was much discontent. The people were always wanting more; always a little more than he could give them.’

Murray didn’t speak.

Juanita leaned forward on the couch and held her slim hands in front of her, and looked at Murray and yet did not seem to be interested in him. Her brother had tried to look exalted, tried to look as if forces within him were too great to be controlled, and it had obviously been pretended. With Juanita, now, it was quite different. She sat with her eyes misty and her lips slightly parted, and it was easy to believe that she was seeing visions. What was she? One moment girl, one moment woman of the world, one moment saint and mystic.

That was when Murray first began to realise that he would never really know Juanita.

‘They were always wanting more, and he gave them all that he thought they should have,’ she said. ‘*Everything.* Sometimes when I was with him I felt as if I

was in the presence of someone holy, as if he knew beyond all doubt what was good and what was bad for others. He is a very simple man, for he believes in simplicity and is sure that one of the causes of the failure of men to live together in happiness is their desire for greater wealth and riches. He believes that man should live closer to the soil, and closer to the spiritual values of life, that their preoccupation with the material things inevitably leads to disaster.

'Sometimes he persuaded me that he was right, but . . .

Juanita hesitated.

Murray kept quite still, for fear a movement should break the spell which memory had cast upon her. He did not think that he had ever seen anyone more lovely, or anyone more unreal. Ethereal? Saintly? Each was quite right, as words went, but that was all. Transformed? Inspired? He only knew that the effect on him was almost stifling, and that he dare not interrupt.

'. . . and sometimes I believed that he was wrong,' went on Juanita quietly. 'It is quite true that he made sure conditions were much, much better in the homes of the people than they had ever been before, and some of the older people were quite content. But the younger people always wanted more. They longed to emulate the Western countries; that was the reason for much of my uncle's anxiety and his troubles. He thought they were wrong.'

She stopped again, this time looking at Murray as if she remembered that he was there, and that he had asked her to recall everything she could.

'It was a difficult choice to make,' she said.

'Choice?' echoed Murray.

'Yes, of course,' Juanita said. 'He could have given the people much more than they have now—as much or more than they wanted.'

Murray didn't understand what she meant, but it wasn't the moment to interrupt.

'That was the greatest of his anxieties,' Juanita went on. 'To decide whether he was right to keep material riches away, from the island, or whether he should give the younger people the wealth they craved, and try to help them to use it in the right way.'

What wealth?

Murray still did not speak aloud.

'Sometimes I believe that he only talked freely to me after my father died,' Juanita said. 'My father was his one confidant. They were more than friends, much more like brothers. They had a complete identity of outlook, too. Did you know that? The great English lawyer and the inspired Cannan visionary.' She paused after that, as if there was something magical in the word 'visionary', and Murray felt as if he was on the threshold of a great discovery.

'They lived only for Canna,' Juanita went on in a faraway voice. 'Meya Kamil told me time and time again that if it had not been for my father, the island would not have prospered as it had. The Colonial Office was greatly influenced by my father, and it was he who really secured the measure of self-government we now have, who persuaded the British Government to place the power in the hands of the people, to have a native Governor—Meya Kamil—to leave the administration almost entirely in the hands of the House of Representatives. For a while they made it what it was, a beautiful island whose people were contented with their work in the fields, growing nearly all they needed for their own welfare, selling abroad their grapes and their wines, their fruits and their grain. It was to be a paradise, and for a while it was—but that was long ago. Even before he died, my father knew that

changes were inevitable. Meya Kamil tried to delay those changes, but. . .'

She broke off.

Murray watched tensely, almost fearfully, praying that she would not stop.

Then she said more quickly, as if she were coming out of the trance:

'Should he have prevented change and progress? Should he have kept the wealth from the people?'

She stopped again, and now was the moment when Murray had to speak.

'What wealth?' he asked, in a husky voice.

Juanita didn't answer.

'What wealth?' Murray repeated, but he didn't move, and felt now that it might be wrong to question her. But he was impelled to go on; he must get the answer to that question. 'Juanita, what wealth are you talking about? What is there on the island?'

She looked at him vaguely, her eyes more misty than before, rather as if she was not quite sure what she was saying.

'After the earthquake,' she said, 'they found gold.'

She closed her eyes.

Gold?

'After the earthquake,' she repeated in a softer voice, 'they found the gold. They found rich deposits in the rocks on the south-western part of the island, the part which has never been cultivated. A small group of men, with my father, went to relieve a hillside village which had been cut off by the earthquake, and they found the gold then. Hills had been split asunder to reveal it. They reached the village, and then there was another tremor, and all except two men —one of them was my father, the other Meya Kamil—were killed. Afterwards, there were the spiders.'

She clenched her hands and lost much of her colour, as if the fear of the creatures pierced her consciousness even now.

'Everyone feared the spiders, which came out of the broken rocks,' she said, 'and it was barren land, so no one ever wanted to go near, and no one did. Because of the spiders, a law was passed that no one should go into the hills, and for many years no one went there. But in recent years some did go.'

She stopped again.

Murray found himself asking chokily: 'Did they find the gold?' When she didn't answer, he made himself repeat: 'Juanita, did they find the gold?'

'I do not know,' said Juanita, 'but the trouble in the island began after the old law had been disobeyed. Meya Kamil tried to enforce it, but some of the people defied him. . .'

'Which people?'

'I do not know,' said Juanita; 'Meya Kamil told me of this, I did not find out for myself what was happening, because I did not go to the hills.'

'Did your brother go?'

'Yes, my brother went there.'

'Do you know of anyone else who went to the hills?'

'No,' said Juanita, 'I know of no one else—except Meya Kamil. He went there, and when he came back he told me that I must leave the island because he thought it would be better for me to live in England for a while. That was when he told me what I had to do.'

'And was that all he said?'

'Yes,' answered Juanita. 'But I believe that at the time he was very frightened.'

Murray watched her, seeing the way she leaned back, as if talking had

exhausted her. She moved to the end of the couch, where a cushion was placed awkwardly beneath her head. She drew her legs up, and snuggled down—and looked no more than a child, about to fall asleep. He placed the cushion more comfortably, and she did not seem to notice. It was as if she had fallen into a trance.

She looked so peaceful.

Soon she slept.

Murray went out, across the landing, leaving his front door open—and pressed the bell of Jane Wyatt's flat. He did not want to leave Juanita alone even for a moment, but he had to see Craigie. While he waited, he felt uneasy at the thought of leaving both women alone here. Craigie and Loftus had told him that the flats were closely watched, but he had seen no evidence.

Jane opened the door.

He told her—

'Of course I'll come and stay with her,' Jane said at once, 'and when she feels better, I'll bring her to my flat. Don't worry, Nigel; we're watched all the time.'

'I hope you're right,' said Murray, then added almost jerkily: 'Take care of her.'

Jane didn't speak, but followed him into his flat. Then Murray left, hurrying to the car; and this time he made sure as he could that no spiders were there before he got in and drove off.

Craigie and Loftus were in the office, Loftus at one of the filing cabinets, Craigie with a mass of papers spread out at one of the large desks. On a small table by his side was a relief map of the Island of Canna, and stuck into this in many places were small red flags, showing localities where outrages had taken place. Pinned to the map were the cables which had come in today, or notes of telephone messages which had been received since the trouble had begun.

Craigie was studying all the reports which had come from the island with a concentration which helped to explain his profound knowledge of what was happening there and in the rest of the Middle East. His memory bewildered most people who knew him.

Loftus's face was set and hard.

Craigie seemed to be in a different mood, as if the number of outrages was beginning to alarm him and he was working under too great a pressure and against time. Now and again a telephone bell rang; whenever it was one with a red light on it, Loftus stopped and watched until Craigie finished speaking, put down the receiver and then picked up another small red flag and pinned it into another spot on the map.

In half an hour, between five o'clock and five-thirty, he had put in four.

Another telephone light showed—the direct line to Number 10. Craigie picked it up, slowly, and Loftus turned round an took up an extension.

'Craigie. . .' Craigie said.

The Prime Minister's voice was usually slow and very carefully modulated, but now it held a note of urgency and he spoke very quickly—at times it was difficult to understand everything he said.

'. . . very great anxiety indeed, Craigie. . . . Alarming indications that the uprising has been planned to take place all over the island simultaneously, and many members of the House of Representatives are in danger of their lives. . . . Yes . . . yes, it is being put about that these members were behind Meya Kamil's dismissal.

Nonsense, of course, the whole claim is, but . . . Yes . . . No, we have had no indication at all, we were hoping that you . . . Yes, of course, I know you will, but I can't emphasise too heavily the dangers and the delicacy of the situation; already there are reports of minor outbreaks of trouble in some of the other colonies; when a thing like this happens there's no telling how quickly it can spread. Yes. . . . Now, there's another thing, this matter of Charles Lang as successor to Meya Kamil; there are influential groups in the House of Representatives who think that it might be possible, but others are bitterly opposed; young Lang has a mixed reputation. . . . No, I know you didn't recommend it, but everything has to be considered, and the situation is one of desperate urgency. . . . Yes, yes, the moment you have any news, tell me—never mind what time of day or night, or what I'm doing, interrupt me. ... I'll leave instructions. . . . Oh, we shall be having a Cabinet Meeting early tomorrow morning, and will call one tonight if the situation gets worse—Yes—Thank you Craigie.'

The Prime Minister rang off.

Craigie put the receiver down slowly, and Loftus dropped his with a clatter, then scowled as he perched on the corner of Craigie's desk. Another telephone light glowed: red. 'More trouble?' Loftus almost groaned and watched Craigie lift the receiver. He listened for thirty seconds, then said: 'Thanks, yes,' and put the receiver down, but he didn't speak to Loftus, just picked up another little red flag and stuck it into the dot on the map which represented a small town on the southern coast of the island.

'Bad?' asked Loftus.

'Home of the English Officer of Customs stoned, wife shot at, child saved from kidnapping, a nursemaid killed,' Craigie said in a clipped voice.

'They really think they can force us out.'

'Looks like it. The two regiments of the Guards have arrived,' Craigie went on, 'but if the rest of this rising is handled as well as the beginning, two regiments won't be nearly enough, and sending the troops will inflame the situation—a lot of islanders who are keeping out of it now will jump in if we start too much force.'

'Damn it, we've got to use force!'

Craigie said quietly: 'That's one of the things you and I have never really agreed about, Bill, but you're as near right this time as you can ever be. Usually it can be stopped before force is needed, the use of force is usually an admission of the utter failure of administration, but normally we're able to warn the Government of what's coming, too. The shocking thing now is that no one appears to have the slightest inkling of how serious it was.'

'Too smug,' said Loftus abruptly. 'Took it for granted that everything would carry on smoothly as it always had. Even Rondo only reported one or two firebrands talking a lot of nonsense.'

A faint buzzing sound came abruptly, and both men looked round to see a green light shining in the mantelpiece. Only when a caller pressed the concealed button outside, through the crack in the handrail, would the green light show. Craigie pressed a button in the desk, one controlling the inner door in the wall, and a moment later it opened to reveal Harrison,

He came in, quickly.

'Hallo, Mick,' Craigie said, as the door slid to behind the stocky agent.

''Lo,' greeted Harrison, gruffly. He was frowning, looking as if he was weighed down by the knowledge of what was happening on Canna, and his own impotence.

‘Thought I’d better come and report this one in person—Victor’s taken over at Hampstead, I’m due for a spell of rest.’ He lit a cigarette, and stood by one of the armchairs; there was not even a suspicion of the flippancy which he had shown to Murray. ‘This Charles Lang is all phoney,’ he announced, abruptly.

‘Yes,’ said Craigie.

‘He’s going about looking as if he’d come into a fortune,’ Harrison went on, ‘and he keeps raising his hands to heaven and thanking the fates for the power about to be placed in his hands. He seems to take it for granted that he’ll be successor to Meya Kamil.’

‘Does he?’

‘Yes. And God help us or Canna if he ever gets his hands on the job; the fellow’s a lunatic,’ Harrison growled. ‘If I had my way I’d make sure he was never allowed to set foot in Canna again, he’s enough to make a simpleton want to cut his throat. Nauseating,’ said Harrison, and gave a bark of a laugh.

‘That’s one thing. You got that tape recording, didn’tyou?’

‘Yes.’

‘Not much more I can say,’ declared Harrison, ‘not about that, anyhow. Murray did a good job, no flies on Nigel Murray. But he has one fault in common with some of the rest of us, but not in common with you, Gordon.’

Craigie sat very still behind the littered desk, and with a hand touching one of the little red flags on the map of the island.

‘What fault’s that?’

‘He’s human,’ Harrison blurted out. ‘Made of flesh and blood. Remember what it was like when you were? And he wouldn’t be human if he didn’t feel ready to drop everything for the sake of Juanita Lang. Now that I’m out of the house I can be nearly objective,’ went on Harrison, ‘but whenever she wants to, she can turn me round her little finger. *And* Murray. He was looking at her this afternoon as if he was quite ready to bow down and worship.’ The bark of a laugh came again. ‘Oh, he fights against it, but he can’t help it. The girls seems to be able to switch seduction on and off. She . . .’ Harrison banged a clenched fist into his palm just as Rondo had done earlier, and he looked almost as distressed as Rondo had—’Well, I’m trying to be objective. I sometimes think she doesn’t know what she’s doing, that she’s fey, and at others I think she’s doing the old Circe trick—switching the influence on and off and having fun because she can make strong men do what she likes. I’ve known that kind of thing before, some of the female vampires get sadistic pleasure out of making a man make a fool of himself, but Juanita—she doesn’t seem to be aware of what she’s doing, she seems just a natural seductress.’

Harrison broke off, gave the bark of a laugh again, and then walked towards the desk.

‘Well, it’s off my chest,’ he said. ‘The fact is that while the girl’s about, I don’t feel that I can trust myself. I’m not sure that Murray or anyone else could be proof against her influence. If there hadn’t been these two attempts to kill or capture her, I’d begin to wonder whether she was everything she pretended to be.’

He looked at the map and the red flags, and his eyes narrowed and his lips were pressed very tightly together. Words seemed to force their way out.

‘Bad as that? How many?’ He began to count. *‘Seventeen.* In twenty-four hours, why it’s . . .’

He broke off.

A pink light glowed on a telephone, and Loftus plucked up the receiver, as if glad of something to break the tension which Harrison had heightened. He hung on for a moment, then picked up a pencil and began to scribble, writing in such a way that Craigie could see what he was putting down. He used a form of shorthand which each of them knew, but which no one else could easily understand. The message read:

> 'and grenades and .32 pistols and ammunition sent for examination and report. British manufacture confirmed. Date of manufacture July 1951. Part of consignment of weapons transferred from Egypt to Cyprus during evacuation of the Canal Zone. Consignment was in small cargo vessel, *Fatema,* registered Mombasa. Ship's master disappeared and was later identified in Egypt, extradition requested and agreed. Investigation and subsequent trial proved he diverted cargo, but at that time no proof of place of delivery. Master of *Fatema* tried in Nairobi on charge of fraudulent delivery of cargo and sentenced to seven years imprisonment in Nairobi. Subsequent search of master's home and grounds yielded substantial sum in gold. Source of gold neither discovered nor disclosed.'

Craigie read this almost as quickly as Loftus wrote it down and then read it again, aloud, for Harrison's benefit. Harrison looked puzzled for a moment, but then said abruptly:

'So the arms have been on the island since 1953.' 'That's what it begins to look like,' Craigie agreed. 'I remember that consignment and the arrest of the master— it was always taken for granted that he'd delivered the weapons to French North Africa and undoubtedly he did deliver some there, but. . .' He broke off.

It was a day when he had hardly time to think, no time to switch smoothly from one thing to another, for news kept coming at him from all sides. Now it was a telephone which showed a white light. It was near him, and he stretched out for it, saying quietly: 'Here's Miller.' 'Hallo,' he said into the telephone. 'Craigie here.' He

listened . . . His eyes sparkled, and obviously the fresh news surprised and worried him. He rang off, after a brisk: 'Yes, thanks, I know you will,' looked up at Loftus and Harrison, as if this news was the last straw.

'There's rioting in Parliament Square on the Canna issue,' he said. 'If it gets any worse they'll have to call up police reinforcements or the military, to help clear the square.'

'So they're organised over here,' Loftus said in a strangled voice.

20. The Sign of the Black Spider

On his way to the office, Murray had driven by St. James's Palace into the Mall, then past the Horseguards' Parade and out into Parliament Square, and next along Whitehall. He knew there would be room to park fairly near the Department office, but as he approached the gates of the park, where he would turn left into Parliament Square, traffic was standing in line. There were fifty or sixty cars at least—as well as a long line of cars in Birdcage Walk.

He heard a different sound from anything he had heard before, a roaring, as of water at a deep waterfall.

There was a parking space nearly opposite Downing Street. He slipped into it; walking would probably be quicker. When he got out of the car, the roaring was much louder. He closed and locked the car, and found himself looking down at his feet when a leaf was blown, rustling, under the car. His fear of the spiders was as acute as ever; even a leaf could make him jump.

Then several mounted police went at a trot past him, towards the line of cars.

He walked up the steps towards Downing Street. There were only a few people there, with the usual policeman standing outside the Prime Minister's house, which looked almost drab and commonplace. The roaring was certainly much louder, and he placed it more accurately; it was like the continuous roar of a football crowd, when excitement was rising. But a football crowd seldom kept up the same pitch of excitement as this.

He reached the top of the steps.

A little group of policemen, some eight men in all, appeared at the far end of the street, all moving very quickly. Murray didn't think very much about it, being far too anxious to get to Craigie's office. The story of the gold revealed by the earthquake in Canna might prove to be the key the Department needed.

He wondered if any member of the royal family was at the Abbey; that might explain the roaring.

Then the policemen lined up across the street, and as they did so, the roar seemed to take on a menacing note.

A dozen youths, most of them dusky-skinned, came running round the corner. Murray expected them to pull up at sight of the police, but they rushed on without slowing down; and as they came, a great horde of people appeared from Whitehall. One moment the buses were passing along normally with other traffic, and a few people walked by; the next, a milling mob of people surged from Whitehall into Downing Street, and the little line of policemen had no chance at all to keep them back. Suddenly more policemen came running from the steps which Murray had just climbed—a dozen or so; twenty; thirty. They moved at the double, and had their truncheons drawn.

Among the mob at the far end of the street were several mounted police.

There was some kind of chant coming from thousands of frenzied people, and Murray couldn't make it out at first. He stood close against the wall, while more police came hurrying, as it at all costs the crowd had to be pushed out of Downing Street. The faces of the mob were not all dark; some were almost black, but most were brown, and many were white. Teeth were bared as they bellowed, and gradually Murray was able to distinguish the words of the chant.

'Give us Meya Kamil or get out.'

Murray sensed the shrill note of violence in the cry, sensed the passion which was in the crowd. These were not all Cannans. There were many who had been roused to a point of riot by some unknown forces, and who had completely lost control. *'Give us Meya Kamil or get out,'* they roared, and fell upon the policemen as if they would mow them down and trample them underfoot. One policeman fell. The others somehow held together, arms linked, giving ground very slowly, their feet moving almost as if they were retreating in unison with the chant.

'GIVE US MEYA KAMIL OR GET OUT.'

A policeman moved suddenly to Murray's side, as about fifty rushed up to reinforce that line which was holding the crowd so bravely, but which could not have withstood the pressure much longer by itself.

'Back into the park, sir, please,' the policeman said, civilly; 'must clear the steps and the street.'

Murray said: 'Can't I help? I. . .'

'Sorry, sir; don't argue, please.' The man was as calm as if he was talking about closing time. 'We don't . . .'

A big, burly, dusty-looking man came along, walking quickly, his blue eyes missing nothing. This was Miller, a welcome face because it was familiar. Murray called out eagerly:

'Superintendent!'

Miller glanced up and then came across.

'Hallo,' he greeted. 'Having a nice time, aren't we? What are you doing here?'

'I want to see . . . ?'

'The Boss?' Miller broke in, obviously to make sure that Murray didn't say 'Craigie'. 'Well, you won't get through Parliament Square for the next hour; I'm not sure you'll get into Whitehall from Admiralty Arch, either. I'd better find you a car.'

'Didn't realise you were on business, sir,' the uniformed policeman said, even more civilly. 'Sorry I troubled you.' He went on to help the others and Murray saw that the police were now pushing the crowd back into Whitehall, but that Whitehall was a seething mass of people. Stranded in the middle of the crowd at the end of Downing Street was a London Transport bus, and several of the rioters were scrambling on to it. One of them tossed a heap of leaflets up into the air, and they fluttered down and about like huge snowflakes.

'GIVE US MEYA KAMIL OR GET OUT,' cried the crowd.

'Hand that to any of the police cars you see,' Miller said to Murray, passing him a card; they'll take you round the quickest way; I'll be seeing you.'

He hurried off, burly and vigorous.

The chanting seemed to be dying down as Murray reached the park, seeing three police cars drawn up alongside parked cars, each with a man standing by it. But suddenly another group of rioters appeared. These were mostly young and mostly white as he; they came tearing along as if intent on forcing their way into Downing Street from the other direction. They were not chanting, but were flinging the leaflets right and left, and one of these floated close to Murray. He grabbed, touched but missed it, and then picked it up from the ground.

He turned it over—and shivered.

The picture on the back was remarkable—a lifelike reproduction of one of the

black spiders. And from it there came a balloon with the familiar words inside: GIVE US MEYA KAMIL OR GET OUT.

Murray gave Miller's card to the first of the men by a police car, who glanced at it, and then opened the door. The driver was already at the wheel. Police had held the rioters back from here, as they had from this end of Downing Street, and there was no great delay, although reinforcements of police filled the road.

'One of the ugliest riots I've ever seen, sir,' remarked the police driver, 'bad as the Paris riots before the war. I happened to be over there then. Same people behind them, if you ask me.' He spoke without heat, yet in a tone of deep contempt. 'If you ever get any trouble in London, it's always the Commies—I don't say it's them behind this Canna business, mind you, but whenever they see their chance, they take it. Anything to give the Empire a kick in the pants.'

'These aren't all communists,' Murray said.

'Oh, no, I didn't mean to suggest they were,' the policeman agreed, 'but there's a good sprinkling, and they add fuel to the flames. Been a lot of coloured people over here from different colonies, too, and not all of them have had a square deal. Easy to get them worked up, if you know the right means. Proper art, this rabble rousing, but it won't get them anywhere in the long run.'

Murray said: 'I suppose it won't.'

'Well, you can have as much sympathy as you like with what the poor beggars want, but who's got any time for the way they go about getting it?' Now, feeling crept into the driver's voice, and the other man looked at him as if anxious that he shouldn't say too much. 'Perhaps conditions on Canna ought to be better, although everyone's seemed happy enough with the old boy in charge, but when they start killing helpless women and children just to stir up trouble, start throwing hand grenades regardless, kidnapping kids and committing atrocities not far off Mau Mau horrors; well—you can't deal with them kindly. Only one thing to do, then—use force.'

'A lot of people agree with you,' Murray said.

'Don't you, sir?'

'George, perhaps this gentleman . . . began the man next to the driver, uneasily.

'Don't stop him, let's go on,' said Murray. He could still hear the roar of the crowd in the distance, and saw many more policemen walking briskly towards the scene of the trouble, but no one seemed flurried. 'A straight answer to a straight question,' he went on. 'Yes, I think you have to use force of a kind. But I'm quite sure it will never settle anything permanently.'

'Well, does.*any*thing ever settle anything?' the driver demanded. 'Couldn't exactly say that the United Nations have settled anything, could you? If you ask me, you want a law with a kick in it, and if there isn't a kick, there's no law worthwhile.'

'George. . .

'No, let him carry on.'

'Well, sir,' the driver declared, and now there was no doubt of his bitterness, 'take what's happening in Canna today. Everything looked all right with this chap, Meya Kamil. Then he disappeared, and before you know where you are there's a full-scale revolt. That must have been planned for a hell of a long time. Not much doubt where it's heading, either. Someone is going to say the island wants absolute independence and a republic—and bang goes another bit of the Empire. Well, I happen to have had a son who was killed in the Cyprus troubles, and what I say is,

if the politicians let it come to fighting, then they want to go in with all they've got, and no holds barred. The other way is just playing at it. I'd send a division, and some of the Navy and the Air Force, and *I'd* make the devils know we meant business.'

So would many thousands of others.

And if it were done that way, it would create a bitterness and a hatred in the people of the island which nothing would ever eradicate.

Craigie was alone in the office when Murray arrived.

He was standing at his desk and looking at the island's relief map; it seemed to be littered with red flags, thirty of them at least. He pressed his hands against his forehead as Murray went in, and Murray was quick to see that the expression in his eyes was very different from what it had been. Craigie saw these issues clearly, and knew exactly what would happen if the rule of force was vigorously imposed.

There was fear in him.

'Well, Nigel,' he said, 'they don't mean to lose any time, do they? If it goes on for many more days I should say it will be beyond Meya Kamil or anyone else to remedy. We can't keep pace with it.'

'We might be nearer than we think,' Murray said quietly. He felt the rising of his own excitement when he saw the glint which sprang to Craigie's eyes, and went on: 'Did you know there was gold on the island—a very big deposit, out in the hills where the earthquake struck twenty years ago?'

Craigie said, almost breathlessly: 'No, I didn't. Are you sure?'

'Juanita seems to be sure. Her father and Meya Kamil found it years ago. Everyone else with the party was killed in a fall of rock, and the two decided to keep it secret. They believed that if the gold were found and mined it would completely change the character of the island and the people so.. .'

'Gold,' repeated Craigie, and his voice became suddenly higher pitched. 'There was gold on the *Fatema,* the ship which carried those arms, the master was paid in gold. Man named Crossman. He's in a Nairobi jail now.' He moved swiftly towards the desk and picked up a telephone. 'If we can find out who paid him, we might be much nearer the end than we think.' He paused, then spoke into the telephone. 'Prime Minister . . .'

His voice seemed to crackle.

'Yes,' he said, 'I'd bring Crossman over here if he won't talk where he is, but there ought to be some way to make him talk.'

'Yes,' he repeated, 'I'll talk to my chief agent in Nairobi, and I'll call you back.'

When he rang off his eyes were glistening, and he looked much younger than he had a few minutes ago; hope had taken the years away. He didn't pick up another telephone at once, but looked at Murray as if there was a lot that he wanted to say, but he didn't quite know how to say it.

Then:

'We need to check all the movements of that ship, and get the files on the master's movements before he was caught. Rondo was on that job for us; who did he have with him?' He turned swiftly to one of the cabinets, pulled out a drawer, and began to touch files which Murray could only just see.

A telephone light glowed, and there was a faint buzzing sound.

'Answer that, will you?' He kept touching the files, and as Murray moved, he

went on speaking *sotto voce,* 'if we could prove that someone is after independence for the island just to get hold of rich deposits of gold—but who can convince the people, except Meya Kamil?'

Murray said: 'Hallo.'

'That isn't Craigie or Loftus,' a woman said, in a voice which he recognised at once. 'It's—oh, Nigel!' That came with a wealth of relief. 'This is Jane Wyatt, T-T-A . . .'

'Yes, Jane,' Murray said.

'Nigel,' Jane went on, and her voice was almost quivering with emotion, 'Juanita thinks she knows where Meya Kamil is, she . . .'

Then, Jane stopped.

There was a pause.

Then, Murray heard a scream.

21. Life or Death

To Murray, there was horror in the scream and horror in the silence from Jane. He stood for a second, gripping the telephone so tightly that it hurt, aware that Craigie was coming towards him, while he said:

'What is it? Jane, what is it?'

She didn't answer, and there was no other scream, no other sound except the faint buzzing of the telephone line.

'Jane!'

The sliding door opened, and Loftus came in, clothes rumpled and a lock of hair falling over his right eye; he pushed it back impatiently, but obviously didn't think much about it. He said something, but Murray didn't catch it as he thrust the telephone into Craigie's hand, and declared roughly:

'I'm going over there.'

'I'll send others,' Craigie said. 'What . . .'

Murray was already striding towards the door, which for once stood open, and Loftus moved to one side as if he knew that it would be folly to try to stop him.

'Jane said that Juanita thinks she knows where Meya Kamil is. Then there was a scream, and that's all.' Murray reached the door and added roughly: 'If they've hurt either . . .'

He broke off.

He went racing down the stairs and into the street. It was nearly dark and difficult to realise now, that there had been such a crush and a roar. A few groups of people were moving about Whitehall, and there were more police than usual, but that was all. The Jaguar was too far away, but the police car was parked nearby, and the driver stood by it.

'Whereto, sir?'

'Dineley Street, off Jermyn Street, and quicker than you've ever been in your life.'

'Right, sir.'

If Murray hadn't been in the car he would never have believed that one could drive so fast through London. The driver simply put his foot down, and weaved through the traffic, beat the lights, and did it all without jeopardising them or anyone else. They were swinging out of the Mall and towards St. James's Street almost as soon as Murray himself could have wished; there had been only moments of waiting.

He didn't know how soon Craigie could get other men to the house. But what good would that do? What had happened to the men watching? All this at stake; and . . .

He didn't know whether he would be in time.

He kept telling himself that the scream had meant that there was a spider in the flat, or something as frightening, but he couldn't be sure. But he was sure that it had been Juanita. Jane might cry out but wouldn't scream in that way, wouldn't give voice to such terror. He stared at the corner of Dineley Street, and everything seemed normal, there were no crowds, no police, just a home-going crowd of soberly-dressed people. Then they swung into the cul-de- sac.

Everything seemed normal.

But that scream, and that silence . . .

The driver said: 'What number, sir?'

'Half-way along, on the left,' Murray said. He was already opening the door of the car, and as it slowed down, he pushed the door open wide and began to jump out. 'Be careful; this could be murderous,' he warned, and jumped.

He just avoided a lamp-post, its light glowing.

The front door of Number 5 was closed, everything looked so peaceful that it was still hard to believe that cry of fear. He had his key out as he reached the door, thrust it into the lock and twisted. The door didn't open properly. He pushed, and it wouldn't yield more than an inch. He put his shoulder to it, and the driver and his companion came hurrying. There was only room for two of them at a time, and Murray and the driver put all their strength against the door, which gradually opened until there was just room for Murray to squeeze inside. Inside, it was dark. Everything in him screamed: *'Be Careful!'* but there was no thought of his own danger.

He pressed a switch, but no light went on, yet he could just see.

There was Harrison doubled up on the floor, with his right hand five times its normal size.

Harrison lay quite still and Murray believed that he was dead. That swollen hand and the redness told its own story, Harrison had died like the sharp-featured Cannan and like Rondo—from the bite of the black spider, fn spite of the awful urgency, Murray found himself scanning the floor and the stairs, but he saw none in the poor light.

The driver had squeezed through after him, and said: 'Be—be careful, sir; he—he's been stung by something.'

'Yes,' Murray said, 'I—isn't there a bootmaker's at the corner?' Hope flared with an idea.

'Yes, sir but . . .'

'Go and see if anyone's in, knock 'em up if needs be, and try and get some riding boots, size nine or bigger,' Murray said urgently. 'Riding-boots and some gloves if you can. Hurry.' He was already at the door of the lift, but could hear no sound and could see no sign of the other men, or of either of the women. He pressed the starter button, and nothing happened. He switched the power-switch up and down, but it made no difference, the lift was out of order. Was the electricity cut off?

He darted into the hall, towards the stairs. The staircase, in a poor light, wound up the three floors.

The driver had gone, but a car was drawing up outside; this might be more of Craigie's men.

A hell of a lot of use . . .

Murray started up the stairs two at a time, and as he went he looked about for signs of the spiders, but saw none. He reached the first landing. He was already breathing hard, but did not slacken speed as he turned the curve in the stairs.

Then he saw a spider, crushed; and a man, dead.

Half-way up the stairs were several more spiders, also crushed. Then he reached the next landing—and here were two more men, on the floor, one with his face horribly swollen, one with a foot twice its normal size.

Oh, God!

Murray kept going, but the horror of what he saw was as bad as the horror that

he feared. At the next landing another two men were lying as if dead, and several of the creatures, all crushed. It looked as if the Department men had trodden on them, taking a desperate chance to try to save Juanita.

He tried to put the thought away from him as he went up to the next landing; his, and Jane Wyatt's. This was where he had left them, this was where . . .

He saw both his door and that of the other flat wide open.

He heard a sound, as if someone was pushing against a door; it was very like the sound he had heard downstairs when he had pushed Harrison's body out of the way. He reached the landing itself and looked desperately right and left, then realised that the sound was coming from Jane's flat.

Jane would have taken Juanita in with her, and . . .

Then he saw the spiders; not one but hundreds. *Hund-dreds,* crawling everywhere.

That was all he could see in the light from the street.

They swarmed about the floor of the flat, on chairs, on tables, an invasion of the creatures, enough to kill people by the hundred. A few were still close to the door, and looked as if they might turn towards Murray. He didn't move, but stared in mounting horror, then heard that sound again: *thud, thud, thud.* Something was pushing at a door, he felt sure of it, but how could he find out?

'Jane!' he cried. 'Jane!'

There was a momentary pause in the thudding, and then it went on again.

'Jane! Juanita!'

There was no answer; he could hear just that sound and a strange undercurrent of a different noise, also—like a faint scratching. And he knew what caused it: the scuttling mass of spiders on the wooden floor. He knew more. Someone was trying to batter his way into the bathroom, which led off the bedroom; it was the only door of the flat which couldn't be seen from the front door. So, someone was locked in the bathroom.

Juanita and Jane?

Between him and the bathroom was this carpet of horror.

He heard someone else coming up the stairs, and glanced down. It was the driver, carrying two pairs of riding-boots, but he did not appear to have any gloves. There were other sounds, as of other men entering the hall.

'Throw them up!' Murray shouted, and as the man stopped and began to obey, he added gaspingly: 'Tell the men outside that the place is swarming with spiders. Tell them to get a ladder up to the bathroom of Flat 6. Got that? Ladder up to the bathroom of Flat 6.'

He clutched at a shiny brown leather boot, and it slid through his fingers and fell behind him. He caught the second.

'. . . no gloves,' the man cried, then turned and raced down the stairs. Murray heard him talking to someone as he began to kick off his shoes and to drag the boots on. As he did so, standing on one foot, a spider came scuttling towards him. Murray tugged until he had one boot on, and then he struck the creature away with the other.

It turned over on its back; dead.

Murray dragged on the other boot. The thud-thud-thud was still going on. He gritted his teeth as he went forward, right hand in his pocket about the pistol, left hand clenched. The floor was thick with the spiders, but he had to tread on them,

and felt one crunch. He drew nearer the bedroom door, and the thudding seemed to grow louder. Then he heard a different sound; perhaps a stifled scream.

Juanita?

Jane?

Murray reached the bedroom door, as the creatures crunched and squeaked beneath him and scuttled in every direction. He saw the explanation of the thudding, too, and it was all that he had feared. Two men were pushing at the bathroom door. They were in policemen's uniform, but they were no more police than the dead Cannans at the cottage. A flash of understanding told him what had happened. The uniforms had been enough to persuade Harrison to open the door, and once the front door had opened the men had released the spiders.

What else could have happened?

Forget it!

The bathroom door was already open a crack; he could just see that. *Open.* The two men wore thick rubber gloves and waders, and were in no danger, but the spiders were massed on the floor, as if they wanted to help to break the door down, so as to get in.

It opened a fraction of an inch wider.

One of the men was looking over his shoulder, and as Murray appeared, he stopped pushing and flung off his glove. Murray saw the little, spray-shaped gun on a table within easy reach, but the man had no chance to reach it. Murray shot him in the chest, and he reeled and staggered and then, screaming, he crashed down; and in a moment he seemed to be smothered by the creatures, and he screamed again.

The other man kept his shoulder at the door, although he had turned his head and could see what was happening. He didn't try to get at a gun, didn't try to defend himself, all he wanted was to get that door open, and he was succeeding. It opened nearly an inch, now, and Murray saw several spiders pushing their way through, heard another cry from inside the bathroom, and then shot the second man in the back.

The same thing happened.

And as the man fell, and was swarmed with the creatures, the door slammed shutting the rest of them out. But . . .

Some spiders were inside.

22. Two Women

Jane Wyatt thrust her weight against the door, straining every effort to keep it from opening, but she knew that she couldn't keep it closed for very long. Nor could Juanita. The younger woman was pushing as hard as she could with both hands, but there was little strength left in her; she was deathly pale, and looked as if she would drop. They had been pushing against this door for what seemed an age; from the moment that Juanita, behind Jane at the telephone, had screamed and made her look round in alarm. There had been the spiders, streaming in. She had been in the bed-room; the one thing in their favour, and she had thrust Juanita into the bathroom, followed her, and slammed the door.

She did not know how the spiders had been introduced into the flat, she had not seen the men—but within seconds someone had tried to force the door open, and the first massive onslaught had weakened the brass bolt which held it in position.

There was no key, and the door could not be fastened from the outside.

Then she and Juanita had tried to stop the door from opening, but every second had been more difficult, and now there was pain in her arms and legs, her wrists ached, her jaw hurt where she had clenched her teeth. She was really doing this on her own now, there was hardly any strength left in Juanita's effort.

She did not think there was any hope.

The pressure continued and the door kept shaking beneath continual blows. The tiny bolt held only by one loose screw; if she removed her weight it would crash in almost, and once those creatures were in there would be no chance.

Juanita made a gasping sound, then fell against the door her arms slack by her sides; she was gasping and powerless.

A good light came from the street.

Jane said fiercely: 'Get into the bath, step into the bath!' The spiders could not climb up the smooth sides, there was still a way to retreat and a way to fight; but the men out there would make sure that they didn't hold out for long, once the door was open.

'Get into the bath,' Jane ordered, shrilly; *'hurry, hurry!'*

Juanita looked at her, almost stupidly.

'Get into the bath!' cried Jane and then left the door for a fraction of a second and bundled the girl towards the bath, half lifting Juanita in. She heard the creaking at the door, saw more wood splinter at the little bolt, and then flung herself at it.

A spider crawled in.

Another.

She had to stand against the door and pray that these two would not bite her, or jump away and try to get into the bath, and let that awful swarm come in.

Then, she heard the sharp report of a shot; a pause; and another shot. There were other sounds, but they did not matter for there was one blessed relief—the thudding at the door stopped.

Jane leaned against it, sweat pouring down her forehead and into her eyes, her mouth open as she gasped for breath, momentarily forgetful of the horror that was still close. Then she caught a glimpse of a little moving black form. She cried out, and jumped away.

How many had come in? She had seen just the two, but there might have been

more. She snatched up the bathroom stool, upturned it, and brought it down on one of the creatures which had stopped, in fright. She could not see the other. Juanita was leaning against the wall, and the shower was dripping a little on her head. *Drip, Drip. Drip.* She had her face buried in her hands, and her shoulders were moving convulsively.

Jane watched every part of the floor.

Where was the thing?

There were no curtain, no hidden corner, not. . . .

She saw it, lurking just behind the pedestal hand-basin. While it stayed there she could move, and the bath was opposite the hand-basin; she need not go near it. That was the extent of her relief now—she need fear no others coming in, and a spider could not climb up the smooth side of the bath.

She crept towards the bath watching the shiny black shape all the time. Juanita was sobbing. There were sounds outside, but she couldn't distinguish them at first; then she heard Nigel Murray's voice.

'We won't be long! Don't come out! We won't be long!'

Don't come out. . .

That could mean only one thing: that the spiders were still in the bedroom, and that if the door was opened they would swarm in. Jane could remember how the Cannan had shrieked as he had fallen, she could still hear the shrieking of the men outside.

'All—all right!' she called. 'All right!'

She edged towards the bath, where Juanita was quieter. Outside was a street lamp, and she could see a window across the street, where a curtain was drawn. The bright light of the lamp outside shone on the spider, making it look like polished ebony.

Jane was within a foot of the bath and the thing hadn't moved; she need have no fear now.

She reached the bath.

'It's all right,' she said, and there was a sob in her voice as she climbed in, still watching that shiny black shape. 'It's all right, we're safe, it's all right.' She stumbled on the curved bottom of the bath, and fell against Juanita and put her arms round her, but she didn't stop saying: 'We're safe, we're safe, we're safe.' She could think of nothing else, and feared that any moment she might burst into a giggle.

This was hysteria.

Then, she saw a man's foot, at the window.

She stopped shivering, the tendency to giggle vanished, and she stopped muttering: 'We're safe.'

It was a foot in a brown shoe. Someone was climbing down from the roof: she could make out the shape of his legs now, and she saw the other foot come to rest beside the first.

Was this—Craigie's man?

There had been no reassuring cry, nothing to suggest that the man wanted to reassure her. She saw the window opening slowly, and caught a glimpse of a swarthy face, dark, glittering eyes—and she knew that this man did not come from Craigie, he came from the Isle of Canna.

'Nigel!' she screamed. 'Nigel, hurry!'

The spider moved, suddenly, and it went towards the door, and then squatted there, as if it knew that it had trapped her. The man at the window was having

some, trouble, obviously his hold was precarious; but if she climbed over the bath again, the creature which was leering at her might dart upon her.

'Nigel!' she screamed.

Murray heard her.

He had been standing among the spiders, kicking them aside, treading on them, trying desperately to clear a way to the door, and then making sure that no one could go into the bathroom. But as fast as he cleared some, others came back. They crawled over his boots and tried to climb up, but kept falling down. He didn't stop moving, and he was close to the door, surrounded by them, when he heard a sound from outside the flat.

There were three men whom he didn't know.

For a moment he feared that they were hostile, for he saw the squat, spray-shaped pistols in their hands, but they started to spray the floor; one of them told him to keep still, and as the pistols hissed and a little vapour cloud came out, the spiders began to turn over on their backs; he had seen locusts die like this, in a moment of time. The men were swinging their guns from side to side, and there was a sickly sweet smell; Murray didn't know what it was, but that didn't matter, for the creatures were dying in their dozens, and some of them seemed to be scurrying away to get out of the range. But he could reach the door, and the dozens of the brutes which were crouching by it.

Then, Jane screamed.

One of Craigie's men came closer, and squirted the poison along the bottom of the door, and the spiders tumbled over, one by one. Outside there was Loftus's voice, raised as if angrily; or else desperately.

'Nigel!' Jane screamed.

He pushed the door open. He saw the window opening, and a man there with a gun. He fired from his pocket, as the man turned towards him, there was a sharp report and a burst of flame, and then the man toppled backwards off the window-ledge, and he disappeared; strangely, without a sound.

Jane was standing in the bath, looking almost as white as the porcelain itself. Juanita stood by her as if she could not raise her head.

'All right, all right, Jane,' Murray said thickly, and as he spoke Loftus came limping in. 'All right, Jane—Juanita, it's all right, it's all right.'

But . . .

Was it all right, for her?

She took her hands from her face, and for a moment he wished that she had not, for there was terror in them— the kind of terror which she had known when she had seen a man shoot at her from the window of the cottage. It possessed her. It made her lips go stiff as they quivered, it made her whole body tremble, it made her eyes look as if the devil possessed them, and it drew a ravaging hand across her beauty.

Loftus stood by Murray's side and said: 'She's got to talk; she's got to tell us where Meya Kamil is.'

But—could she?

She looked as if shock had turned her mind.

Below, men of the Department bent over the body of the man who had been shot and had fallen to his death.

In his wallet were papers giving his name: Mikolas.

That was all.

23. The Raid

Craigie came into Jane Wyatt's bedroom.

This was the first time that Murray had seen him out of his office. He looked brisk and alert, yet so tired that his eyes were glassy. Murray and Loftus were in the doorway, Jane was standing by the side of the bed, looking down. Juanita lay there, frail and white-faced, with her eyes closed; a sleeping beauty who looked as if she might soon be dead. Obviously shock and fear combined had driven her into a coma. She did not move, and did not seem to be breathing.

Sitting at the side of the bed, his chair pulled up very close to it, and holding the girl's wrist, was an elderly doctor whom Loftus had called within minutes of finding that Juanita could not speak. He had been here for half an hour, and to Murray it seemed as if he was simply wasting time. He had given the girl an injection, ten minutes ago, and now he seemed to be willing her to come round.

Loftus muttered, for the tenth time: 'If only Jane could have made her talk.'

Blame Jane. Blame themselves. Blame anyone.

Murray moved restlessly away from the bedroom door, because he could not bear to watch the girl. He could feel the effect of her nearness, even now, and wondered what he would feel if those compelling eyes, with all their seductiveness, were to open and turn towards him. He lit a cigarette, striking the match savagely, and flicking it away. It fell on a heap of the spiders which had been swept into the fireplace, and the sight of them, even though they were dead, made him shudder.

He had learned a great deal since he had arrived.

The Dineley Hotel, next door to this house, was a kind of hostel for Department Z agents, and sliding doors in the connecting wall—like that at the office—gave easy access to the flats at Number 5. These flats were used by agents who lived on their own when in London. These agents had known the moment the Cannas had called, and had been ready to go through the sliding doors, look after Jane and Juanita, and take the men prisoners. But for one thing, this would have worked.

The electric current had been cut at the street mains just round the corner by 'workmen' who appeared to come from the Electricity Board. The secret doors, being electrically operated, had not opened. Harrison and other agents had rushed to enter the apartment house by the street door, but the spiders had been hurled at them in small glass containers which had burst before they could use their spray guns.

'And all we've got is a dead Mikolas,' Loftus said roughly. 'If we could catch one of them alive. . .'

He broke off.

Murray supposed it mattered, but at heart he had given up hope of getting results, except through Juanita. The revolutionary leaders who worked in England were still unknown. There were dozens of their men in London—the riot had been perfectly organised, the raid on the house had been planned with great skill as well as the courage which fanatics sometimes showed. But although some ringleaders of the riot had been held by the police, none seemed to know who had really inspired it. It was known that several national groups—not only Cannans—had been worked up to a frenzy by communist agitators, that the heart of the riots had been a small group of professional agitators; but—who had put them up to it?

There was no evidence that the troubles on Canna were Communist inspired, only that the communists were taking advantage of the situation.

And here in London, probably within a stone's throw, were men who meant to force revolution upon Canna.

Suddenly, Murray caught his breath; as if he had been hurt.

He saw Loftus look round at him, and he stared back, almost unbelieving. The idea which had flashed into his mind was almost frightening; was unbelievable and fantastic; yet once it had come, it grew stronger. In the bedroom there was quiet. While out here Loftus stared at Murray, and he felt as if something had exploded inside him.

'What is it?' Loftus asked tensely.

'I can't—be sure,' Murray said, and he felt as if the words were choking him. 'That cargo-boat—what was it called?'

'The *Fatema*—if you mean the one which smuggled the arms . . .'

'Yes. The *Fatema,* registered at Mombasa. Loftus—the Abbotts travelled on the *Fatema* for their Middle Eastern tour. The Abbotts and their whole company, the company that's playing at the Glory Theatre now. And—the Abbotts owned Cliff House. They said they'd let it to unknown tenants through an advertisement in *The Times,* but . . .'

Loftus was already moving towards the bedroom, but he kept looking at Murray.

'Go on,' he said roughly.

'They could have done that, and still known who was going to take over Cliff House,' Murray said. 'And their present play is based on mixed marriages and on colour bar. They put on all their own shows, they have money to spend like water—Loftus, it could add up.'

'I'll say it could add up,' Loftus said very softly. He spoke from the doorway, and he looked in and caught Craigie's eye, and beckoned. 'Gordon,' he whispered as Craigie came up, and there was a change in Craigie's expression, as if something in Loftus's face gave him the thing that he, too, had lost. 'Gordon, did you ever find the advertisement in *The Times* for Cliff House? The one the Abbotts said was answered by . . .'

'Yes, it was in, as Abbott said. Why?'

'Listen to Nigel,' Loftus urged.

Murray repeated everything he had said.

'What time does the second house start?' Craigie asked.

'Half-past eight,' answered Murray.

'It's a big cast, isn't it?'

'Twenty odd, yes—double that, if the stage-hands and everyone else back stage is involved?'

'Mostly coloured people?'

'Four or five.'

'We'll call every available man we have, we'll get Miller to put a cordon right round the block, we'll have every corner watched,' Loftus said crisply. 'We mustn't start until nearly half-past eight; we want to make sure that the Abbotts and all the cast are there.' He glanced at his watch. 'It's nearly seven, we'd better get busy. Nigel, you take it easy for an hour.'

Murray said: 'Isn't there something I can do?' 'You've done plenty,' Craigie said.

‘The Abbotts,’ breathed Jane Wyatt. ‘It’s—unbelievable.’

‘I think it’s probably true,’ Murray said. They were back in his flat now, where two doctors were with Juanita, and two agents were on the landing, on guard; no further attacks were expected yet, but there was no way of being sure. ‘Is she any better?’ Murray asked abruptly.

‘No, no change.’

‘It doesn’t seem natural.’

‘It’s like a trance,’ Jane said quietly, ‘the little I’ve seen of her suggests . . .’ She broke off.

‘Go on,’ Murray urged.

Jane looked at him as if afraid that what she said would hurt. Murray sensed that. He also sensed the deep understanding that she had of him; in the few days they had known each other, the friendship which had grown between them had become very deep. Even now, even after all that had happened, and after that ordeal by terror, she looked calm and self-possessed, and was thinking more of him than of herself.

‘Juanita just isn’t normal,’ she said quietly. ‘Sometimes she looked at and through me as if she was looking into a different world, as if she was . . .’

‘Seeing visions.’

‘Yes, I think that’s it.’

‘Her father saw visions,’ said Murray, ‘and her mother was the sister of a visionary. But there were times when she was as human and normal as—as you are. As any girl laughing with her friends.. . She . . .’ There was no point in going on.

Murray moved towards the cabinet, took out drinks, and poured out. He lit a cigarette. He looked at an evening newspaper which reported the grim facts with almost cruel matter-of-factness. There were reports of the day’s outrages on the island, an account of the rioting in London, the news that more troops were to be flown to the island during the night, that martial law had been proclaimed on Canna, that the Navy and the Air Force were to take part in operations to restore order on the island. At a quarter past eight the telephone bell rang. ‘We’re waiting for you downstairs,’ Loftus said.

From the outside, the Glory Theatre looked deserted, but the lights were bright inside the foyer, and the illuminated photographs of the Abbotts seemed to smile at every passer-by. The theatre, a small one, was in a side street off Shaftesbury Avenue, and few people were about, although a few yards away there was the ceaseless flow and noise of traffic. Here, an occasional person walked alongside the parked cars which were bumper to bumper.

The police gathered in shop doorways, in empty cars, wherever they were found unlocked, all waiting for the moment of the raid. In the second-floor windows of a building opposite the theatre there were more men. Small groups of police gathered unostentatiously at the corners of the street. The side as well as the front entrances were blocked, and everything was in readiness when Murray, Craigie and Loftus arrived.

They got out of the car in front of the main entrance.

‘We’ll go to the stage door,’ Loftus said. ‘You’re known slightly; that might gain us a minute. At twenty to nine exactly, the men at the front are going to move in. And it’s got to be quick, because—’

He didn't finish.

'The one thing we have to fear are spiders,' Craigie said. 'If they are kept inside here, and if the Abbotts want to try to escape by causing a panic so that we can't get at them, they might let the spiders out.'

Murray swallowed a lump in his throat.

Not far away, Juanita still lay in that coma, and Jane Wyatt was with her; waiting.

Murray reached the stage door, and recognised the grey- haired man with the *pince-nez* who had let him in on his earlier visit, and he smiled at the man brightly as he said:

'Mr. Abbott's expecting me.'

'Is he?' The man looked him up and down, almost suspiciously. 'He didn't say he was expecting anyone tonight.'

'He must have forgotten,' Murray said. 'What time is the first act over?'

'Nine-fifteen,' the stage-door keeper said. 'Didn't you leave the theatre with him, the other night?'

'Yes. I went to see him and his wife . . .'

'Okay,' the stage-door keeper said, 'you can go in.'

They passed him as he settled back to his newspaper. The passage leading to the dressing-rooms and backstage were narrow but very tall. Long boxes, containing props, were placed against some of the walls, and Loftus and Craigie opened each one. Murray went ahead. The others followed. At the door of Lester Abbott's dressing-room Murray paused, and Abbott's dresser appeared, and then backed into the room.

'Is—is Mr. Abbott expecting . . .'

'No,' Loftus said. He slid his gun into his hand, and the middle-aged dresser gulped and tried to back further away. 'We'll announce ourselves. Look round here, Nigel, and hurry.' Loftus waited, keeping the scared man in a corner, while Murray and Craigie searched every part of the room, under the counter in front of the mirror, in the suit-cases, in the wardrobe; and there were no traces of spiders.

But there were the day's newspapers, with the reports of the outrages, and inside Abbott's wallet there was a note, reading: *Mikolas—D. Hotel.*

Loftus bound and gagged the dresser, and left him sitting behind the door. Other agents were coming in now, and the stage-door keeper would know that it was a raid, but was helpless. Murray and the leading party went nearer the stage. They heard a gust of laughter from the audience. In the wings two of three actors, all coloured, were standing in a group, talking. Abbott was on stage, and there was the usual riotous slapstick, shouts, mock screams. Murray, Craigie and Loftus stood watching Abbott as he fooled; and there was little doubt that the man had genius.

So had Lilian.

The raiding party did not interfere with the actors, yet. Murray found himself looking at every box, every chest, every sack which might hold spiders. Hundreds, thousands could be kept in one chest, and if it were opened and upturned, then panic in the theatre was inevitable.

The minutes ticked by.

Craigie looked at his watch. It should be about two minutes to the moment when Abbott came off the stage, in pretended high dudgeon about something that Lilian had done. Now he was clowning with a magical touch, and the audience was near hysteria. It was possible to imagine them swaying up and down in their seats,

holding their sides, gasping, coughing, crying with laughter.

If that turned to panic, it could be utterly disastrous.

They had found no spiders; and none had been found the other side, or they would have been told. There was the possibility that all that had been brought to England were dead, after being used in the onslaught at Dineley Street, but—would Abbott leave himself without some form of defence? He must live with the fear that he would be suspected, must be ready to act if an emergency came.

He turned from the middle of the stage and stalked towards the wings. Murray and the others pressed back against the curtains, and Abbott did not see them at once. Lilian was posturing on the stage, and the audience was still in roars of laughter.

Then Abbott saw Murray.

He must have realised why he was here, on the instant. His back was to the stage itself, and the audience could see him. A dozen or more actors were still on the stage, and there was a moment's pause, as if Abbott had somehow managed to send a warning to them.

'Hallo, Lester,' Murray said, in a hard voice. 'I think you'd like to meet my friends here.'

Abbott was two yards away.

'Friends,' he echoed. 'This is outrageous, to come here in the middle of a scene, I . . .'

He turned round and made a dash for the back of the stage, in full view of the audience. They thought that it was part of the action, and laughter reached a screaming pitch. Then the actor pressed down a switch on a wall of the set, and as he did so, a whirring came from the ceiling of the theatre.

Murray looked up.

Spiders were falling from the crates in the ceiling, put there to let flowers and confetti fall upon the audience.

Spiders, in their hundreds—on to the audience and here, on to the stage.

Murray *saw* a spider bite Abbott's face, but it did not affect him.

24. The Gold

No one on the stage was affected at first, but there was awful tension. It was somehow worse because the audience in the packed theatre was still roaring with laughter, and holding its sides. A few in the back rows on the stalls and the gallery and circle saw men running down from the exits, and wondered what they were doing; they seemed to be spraying the theatre, as if with disinfectant, in the way that had been common a few years ago. As they ran, 'things' began to drop from the ceiling, on to hats, on to hair, on to laps, on to faces.

Suddenly, there was a deathly hush.

It lasted only for a moment, as if that moment was needed for the transition from hilarity to horror. Then a woman screamed; a man; a woman, men and women, screamed and jumped up and beat their heads and faces as the spiders landed and crawled and filled the aisles.

There were Craigie's men, their sprays worked like demons, but the people came tearing out of the seats and getting in their way, trying desperately to escape the creatures which brought such pain and awful death. Now the screaming was on the same high pitch of intensity as the laughter; it was as if the laughter had become maniacal.

Then the spiders began to turn over on their backs, and the screaming slackened, while police, in their uniforms, came in from all the entrances and fought to restore order and prevent the disaster of sheer panic.

One thing was clear now: Abbot and his wife were proof against the spiders' poison, but the other actors were not.

On the stage, aware of the horror in the auditorium, Murray faced Abbott, who hadn't moved from the switch. Some of the actors had run, terrified, into the arms of waiting men; agents with the poison sprays were moving about swiftly. Loftus had seized Lilian Abbott as she had run for cover, and now Murray faced Abbott, covering him with a gun.

A spider, close to his foot, turned over.

'Do you know where Meya Kamil is?' Murray demanded, in a harsh voice. 'Do you know?'

'If I knew, he would be dead,' said Abbott.

So there it was.

Abbott was behind this terror, Abbott was its leader. The one sentence was all the admission needed, and the rest could be pieced together and proved, but—would he lie about this? Wasn't it logical that he should want to make sure that Meya Kamil was dead?

No one knew whether the old man was dead or alive, but Juanita believed that she might know where to find him.

Juanita was still in a coma.

'We've one possible chance,' Craigie said, very quietly. It was half an hour after the raid on the theatre, and the auditorium was empty, except for police and Department Z men. The panic had been stayed, but not until over thirty people had

been bitten by the spiders.

Abbott had admitted that he and Lilian had been inoculated against the poison, but that the serum used was only just enough for the two of them; their workers had been in as much danger as the audience.

The Abbotts were still being questioned. Every member of the cast, the stage hands, the electricians, the wardrobe mistress and the dressers, the stage manager and his assistants—everyone connected with Abbott's company, and there were fifty in all—were under arrest, some at Cannon Row, some in other police stations. A few had talked, too, admitting what they had been doing, admitting everything that Murray and the others suspected. Abbott had discovered the gold, in vast quantities, gold enough to make him fabulously wealthy, gold to give him and those who served him everything they wanted; but to keep it they needed control of the Isle of Canna.

It was in a part of the island never visited by the islanders, a part believed to be inaccessible, and was so near the surface and so thickly deposited that a few men could work the lode, and load the precious metal on a ship which sometimes called by night.

Meya Kamil could have made the discovery of the gold public. But he had preferred to keep it secret, believing that it would not bring prosperity but corruption to the island. This determination to keep it from the people and so preserve his 'paradise' had given Abbott the chance he had needed to carry out his plot, which had been maturing for four years. There was also talk that Abbott had become a violent renegade, hating his country for some reason which no one yet knew.

First there had been fanaticism, and then there had been the prize of untold wealth.

So, Abbott had laid his plans and stored the weapons and selected his leaders on the island, then started the revolt, feeling quite sure that communists and other groups would join in the general uprising. And he had believed that the British would have to withdraw, leaving Canna wholly independent, and the new rulers would be politicians already in his pay, and he would be given—at least, he had been promised—the sole concession to work the veins of gold.

'We've one possible chance,' Craigie said, very quietly. 'If the girl doesn't come round, her brother might to able to tell us more than he has.'

They were getting into the car which had been brought round to the theatre for them. The street was crowded, for rumours of a disaster had spread after the ambulances had come tearing into the street, and the police had been seen in their hundreds. The car moved slowly towards Shaftsbury Avenue then quickened its pace until they were heading for Hampstead along almost deserted roads.

Soon they came to the Lang's house.

The guards outside had nothing to report. Charles Lang had not been out all the evening, and he was alone, for the servants had left, as well as Mrs. Lang and the twins. Charles was there, then, with his dreams of future power and glory, and Murray wondered what he was doing, what he would think or say when he knew exactly what had happened.

There was no certainty that he knew where to find Meya Kamil.

He came quickly, to open the door, and his face lit up when he saw Murray and the others, as if he believed that they had come to offer him the succession to his uncle. He looked startlingly handsome and wildly excited as he led them into the big

room where the photograph of Meya Kamil was, and he looked up at it, almost as if in worship.

'What have you decided?' he asked abruptly. 'Do you realise that only I . . . ?'

Craigie interrupted, very quietly.

'I wonder if you fully realise the issues at stake, Mr.Lang. The whole of the Island of Canna is inflamed to explosion point. Strong forces of British troops are on their way, and tomorrow morning there may be an absolute disaster, with pitched battles and open civil war. That will bring nothing but grief and sorrow and suffering to the people themselves.'

Lang said angrily: 'You are exaggerating! It is bad enough, but—'

'It's no exaggeration,' Craigie insisted. 'Every report from the island says that the situation is worsening rapidly. It was all planned to happen very quickly. Picked groups of terrorists are planning further outrages during the night, to make sure that the whole island is in uproar by morning. Do you really believe that you could quieten the people when that happens?'

Charles Lang didn't speak, but the glitter in his eyes gave a hint of madness.

'We know how it began and who began it; we know that one man planned to take control of the island, because of the gold on it,' Craigie went on. 'Did you know of the gold?'

Lang caught his breath.

'Did you?' Craigie asked again, sharply.

'I knew of it, but that did not influence my actions,' Lang protested; 'I have only the good of the people at heart.'

'One thing might save the people and the island now,' Craigie told him softly, 'and that is the return of your uncle. Nothing else can. Do you know where he is?'

'I've told you, no, no, no! He is dead or as good as dead: he must be.'

'Do you know where he is?'

Lang didn't answer.

Murray felt the burning of excitement in his veins as he watched the man. Excitement and desperate eagerness touched Craigie and Loftus, too.'

'Do you know where he is?' Craigie repeated, very softly.

'I don't know where he is,' Lang said shrilly, 'I know where he might be, he always said that he would go there to die, and if he felt that he was dying he would go there.'

'Where?'

'To the tomb of my father, in the mountains of Canna,' Charles Lang said.

There was nothing to do but wait.

Within twenty minutes, Craigie had spoken by telephone to the Department Z agents on the island, and they knew exactly what to do. A strong force of the Guards, already being deployed, had gone with them to the tomb of Judge Lang, which was in the foothills of the mountains—the gateway to the gold which could have saved and had nearly wrecked the paradise of the island. Any time, now, word might come through from the island.

Murray had gone back to Dineley Street, taking Charles Lang with him to see his sister. Lang had hardly spoken since he had told them where they might find his uncle, and he sat in the car, silent, aloof and afterwards walked ahead of Murray as if he did not know or care where he was going. It was not until he was in the room with his sister, who had not stirred since Murray had last seen her, that he seemed

affected by anything except his own great disappointment.

He stared down at her, and then put out a hand and touched her forehead.

'I have seen her like this before,' he said, 'and she always needed *him* to bring her out of it.'

'Meya Kamil?' asked Murray sharply.

'Yes, Meya Kamil,' said Lang. His eyes were brooding as he looked at his sister. 'He always said that she had one weakness, and that was the weakness of submitting to fear. He believed that if she should ever conquer it, she would have as much influence with the people as he, and—perhaps he was right. Perhaps he was right. But—if he's dead, he can't help her, can he?' That came out roughly, and he did not speak again.

Juanita did not stir.

Murray went into the living-room of Jane's flat, poured out drinks, lit a cigarette, squashed it almost at once, and then lit another. Jane had prepared some sandwiches, but he didn't feel like eating. When the telephone bell rang he leapt up to answer it, but although it was Loftus, there was no news yet from Canna.

'There's some about Abbott and the rest of his group in England,' Loftus said. 'We've got them all—with a few more spiders, too. They brought a few mating couples over here, and they breed at a terrific rate. Lilian Abbott had told us much more than anyone else—Abbott always believed that if he was to put his stooges in control of Canna he would have to act swiftly and decisively, and he knew that Department Z would probably give him more trouble than most. She told us something else about him, too—he's quarter Cypriot, and his parents were killed by troops on duty in Cyprus, very early in the troubles. He's always been a revolutionary and at heart anti-British, and that turned him completely.'

Murray said: 'I see.'

'He used Cliff House for agents in England, but had other places in reserve,' Loftus went on. 'He did not intend to operate from Cliff House, but when Juanita was sent to England he wanted to find out why—and believed she knew where Meya Kamil was. He sent her to Cliff House, not dreaming she would escape, and —well, we know what happened then.'

'Yes,' said Murray stiffly.

'So far that's all . . .' began Loftus, and then his tone changed. 'There's the overseas line, Craigie's answering. Hold on.'

He went off the line.

Murray felt as if he was being suffocated. Jane came across, and stood very close to him. Her serenity had faded, with the same desperate anxiety in her eyes. Murray found himself covering her hand with his, felt the pressure of her other hand, felt a sense of oneness, and yet a sense of dread, for this might be the news which mattered so much.

Then, Loftus roared:

'They've found him!'

They had found the Good Man of Canna in the mausoleum of his lifelong friend, Judge Lang, and they had learned that he had discovered the plot to obtain the gold and control of the island, that he had blamed himself, and he had gone to the tomb to pray—as he often did when in great stress of mind.

One of Abbott's men had shut him up in the tomb, blocking the entrance with great rocks, while in England, Abbott had tried to make sure that Juanita did not

know and could not tell anyone where her uncle was.

Now the Good Man was back at Government House.

The news was being spread through radio, loud-speaker and word of mouth. He was to broadcast, at hourly intervals during the night.

Following his broadcast the stark truth of what had happened and who had been behind the plot was told to the people. So was the news of the gold which would give them all the things they sought.

There was another thing.

Meya Kamil had asked that Juanita be flown out to Canna, because he believed that he could bring her out of the trance, and help her, and perhaps groom her to follow him, with his own daughter, as the spiritual leader of the people.

Murray came out of Craigie's office, three weeks later, looking eager, refreshed and rested. He was smiling to himself, and had been smiling most of the time that he had listened to Craigie and Loftus. The reports were completely finished. There was complete quiet on Canna where the mines were being opened, there was a closer bond than ever with the Commonwealth, and:

'Juanita is fully recovered,' Craigie had said, 'but she's going to stay there.'

It was odd but it was true; the great issues faded before the vividness of the personal ones. Juanita was well again, and there was no more to fear for her. She was not like other women, she was half visionary and half fey—and he knew that she would never be for him.

Yet he would see her again.

He was to fly to Canna and make a report for the Department, although ostensibly he would go as the foreign correspondent of the *News-Courier.* The *Post-Dispatch* had asked him to return, but he preferred to make the complete change; he felt more free.

He was going to the island to see Juanita.

But Jane Wyatt was to go with him.

Series Information

Published or to be published by
House of Stratus

Dates given are those of first publication

Gideon Series

(Writing as JJ Marric)

These Titles can be read as a series, or randomly as standalone novels

	Title	*Also Published as:*	
1	Gideon's Day	Gideon of Scotland Yard	1955
2	Seven Days to Death	Gideon's Week	1956
3	Gideon's Night		1957
4	Gideon's Month		1958
5	Gideon's Staff		1959
6	Gideon's Risk		1960
7	Gideon's Fire		1961
8	A Conference for Assassins	Gideon's March	1962
9	Travelling Crimes	Gideon's Ride	1963
10	An Uncivilised Election	Gideon's Vote	1964
11	Criminal Imports	Gideon's Lot	1965
12	Gideon's Badge		1966
13	From Murder to a Cathedral	Gideon's Wrath	1967
14	Gideon's River		1968
15	Gideon's Power		1969
16	Gideon's Sport		1970
17	Gideon's Art		1971
18	Gideon's Men		1972
19	Gideon's Press		1973
20	Gideon's Fog		1975
21	Gideon's Drive		1976
22	Vigilantes & Biscuits	Gideon's Force	1978

Other Series by John Creasey

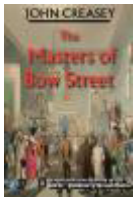
Published or to be published by
House of Stratus

Dates given are those of first publication

'Department 'Z'' (28 titles)
'Dr. Palfrey Novels' (34 titles)

'Inspector West' (43 titles)
'Sexton Blake' (5 titles)
'The Baron' (47 titles) (writing as Anthony Morton)
'The Toff' (59 titles)

along with:



The Masters of Bow Street
This epic novel embraces the story of the Bow Street Runners and the Marine Police, forerunners of the modern police force, who were founded by novelist Henry Fielding in 1748. They were the earliest detective force operating from the courts to enforce the decisions of magistrates. John Creasey's account also gives a fascinating insight into family life of the time and the struggle between crime and justice, and ends with the establishment of the Metropolitan Police after the passing of Peel's Act in 1829.

'The Toff' Series

These Titles can be read as a series, or randomly as standalone novels

	Title	*Also Published as:*	
1	Introducing the Toff	It's the Toff !	1938
2	The Toff Goes On		1939
3	The Toff Steps Out		1939
4	Here Comes the Toff		1940
5	The Toff Breaks In		1940
6	Salute the Toff		1941
7	The Toff Proceeds		1941
8	The Toff Goes to Market		1942
9	The Toff Is Back		1942
10	The Toff on the Trail (short stories)		1942
11	The Toff among the Millions		1943
12	Accuse the Toff		1943
13	The Toff and the Deadly Parson	The Toff and the Curate	1944
14	The Toff and the Great Illusion		1944
15	Feathers for the Toff		1945
16	The Toff and the Lady		1946
17	Poison for the Toff	The Toff on Ice	1946
18	Hammer the Toff		1947
19	The Toff in Town		1948
20	The Toff Takes Shares		1948
21	The Toff and Old Harry		1949

22 The Toff on Board		1949
23 Fool the Toff		1950
24 Kill the Toff		1950
25 A Knife for the Toff		1951
26 A Mask for the Toff	The Toff Goes Gay	1951
27 Hunt the Toff		1952
28 Call the Toff		1953
29 The Toff Down Under	Break the Toff	1953
30 Murder Out of the Past (short stories)		1953
31 The Toff at Camp	The Toff at Butlins	1954
32 The Toff at the Fair		1954
33 A Six for the Toff	A Score for the Toff	1955
34 The Toff and the Deep Blue Sea		1955
35 Kiss the Toff	Make-Up for the Toff	1956
36 The Toff in New York		1956
37 Model for the Toff		1957
38 The Toff on Fire		1957
39 The Toff and the Stolen Tresses		1958
40 Terror for the Toff	The Toff on the Farm	1958
41 Double for the Toff		1959
42 The Toff and the Runaway Bride		1959
43 A Rocket for the Toff		1960
44 The Toff and the Kidnapped	The Kidnapped Child	1960
45 Follow the Toff		1961
46 The Toff and the Toughs	The Toff and the Teds	1961
47 A Doll for the Toff		1963
48 Leave It to the Toff		1963
49 The Toff and the Spider		1965
50 The Toff in Wax		1966
51 A Bundle for the Toff		1967
52 Stars for the Toff		1968
53 The Toff and the Golden Boy		1969
54 The Toff and the Fallen Angels		1970
55 Vote for the Toff		1971
56 The Toff and the Trip-Trip-Triplets		1972
57 The Toff and the Terrified Taxman		1973
58 The Toff and the Sleepy Cowboy		1975
59 The Toff and the Crooked Copper		1977

Inspector West Series

These Titles can be read as a series, or randomly as standalone novels

	Title	*Also Published as:*	
1	Inspector West Takes Charge		1942
2	Go Away to Murder	Inspector West Leaves Town	1943
3	Inspector West at Home		1944
4	Inspector West Regrets		1945
5	Holiday for Inspector West		1946
6	Battle for Inspector West		1948
7	The Case Against Paul Raeburn	Triumph for Inspector West	1948
8	Inspector West Kicks Off	Sport for Inspector West	1949
9	Inspector West Alone		1950
10	Inspector West Cries Wolf	The Creepers	1950
11	The Figure in the Dusk	A Case for Inspector West	1951
12	The Dissemblers	Puzzle for Inspector West	1951
13	The Case of the Acid Throwers	The Blind Spot; Inspector West at Bay	1952
14	Give a Man a Gun	A Gun for Inspector West	1953
15	Send Inspector West		1953
16	So Young, So Cold, So Fair	A Beauty for Inspector West; The Beauty Queen Killer	1954
17	Murder Makes Haste	Inspector West Makes Haste; The Gelignite Gang; Night of the Watchman	1955
18	Murder: One, Two, Three	Two for Inspector West	1955
19	Death of a Postman	Parcels for Inspector West	1956
20	Death of an Assassin	A Prince for Inspector West	1956
21	Hit and Run	Accident for Inspector West	1957
22	The Trouble at Saxby's	Find Inspector West; Doorway to Death	1957
23	Murder, London - New York		1958
24	Strike for Death	The Killing Strike	1958
25	Death of a Racehorse		1959
26	The Case of the Innocent Victims		1959
27	Murder on the Line		1960
28	Death in Cold Print		1961
29	The Scene of the Crime		1961
30	Policeman's Dread		1962
31	Hang the Little Man		1963
32	Look Three Ways at Murder		1964
33	Murder, London - Australia		1965
34	Murder, London - South Africa		1966
35	The Executioners		1967
36	So Young to Burn		1968
37	Murder, London - Miami		1969
38	A Part for a Policeman		1970
39	Alibi for Inspector West		1971
40	A Splinter of Glass		1972
41	The Theft of Magna Carta		1973
42	The Extortioners		1974

‘The Baron’ Series

These Titles can be read as a series, or randomly as standalone novels

	Title	*Also Published as:*	
1	Meet the Baron	The Man in the Blue Mask	1937
2	The Baron Returns	The Return of the Blue Mask	1937
3	The Baron Again	Salute Blue Mask	1938
4	The Baron at Bay	Blue Mask at Bay	1938
5	Alias the Baron	Alias Blue Mask	1939
6	The Baron at Large	Challenge Blue Mask!	1939
7	Versus the Baron	Blue Mask Strikes Again	1940
8	Call for the Baron	Blue Mask Victorious	1940
9	The Baron Comes Back		1943
10	A Case for the Baron		1945
11	Reward for the Baron		1945
12	Career for the Baron		1946
13	The Baron and the Beggar		1947
14	Blame the Baron		1948
15	A Rope for the Baron		1948
16	Books for the Baron		1949
17	Cry for the Baron		1950
18	Trap the Baron		1950
19	Attack the Baron		1951
20	Shadow the Baron		1951
21	Warn the Baron		1952
22	The Baron Goes East		1953
23	The Baron in France		1953
24	Danger for the Baron		1953
25	The Baron Goes Fast		1954
26	Nest-Egg for the Baron	Deaf, Dumb and Blonde	1954
27	Help from the Baron		1955
28	Hide the Baron		1956
29	The Double Frame	Frame the Baron	1957
30	Blood Red	Red Eye for the Baron	1958
31	If Anything Happens to Hester	Black for the Baron	1959
32	Salute for the Baron		1960
33	The Baron Branches Out	A Branch for the Baron	1961
34	The Baron and the Stolen Legacy	Bad for the Baron	1962
35	A Sword for the Baron	The Baron and the Mogul Swords	1963
36	The Baron on Board		1964
37	The Baron and the Chinese Puzzle		1964
38	Sport for the Baron		1966
39	Affair for the Baron		1967
40	The Baron and the Missing Old Masters		1968

41	The Baron and the Unfinished Portrait		1969
42	Last Laugh for the Baron		1970
43	The Baron Goes A-Buying		1971
44	The Baron and the Arrogant Artist		1972
45	Burgle the Baron		1973
46	The Baron - King Maker		1975
47	Love for the Baron		1979

Doctor Palfrey Novels

These Titles can be read as a series, or randomly as standalone novels

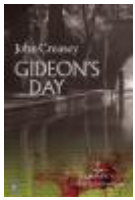
	Title	*Also Published as:*	
1	Traitor's Doom		1942
2	The Legion of the Lost		1943
3	The Valley of Fear	The Perilous Country	1943
4	Dangerous Quest		1944
5	Death in the Rising Sun		1945
6	The Hounds of Vengeance		1945
7	Shadow of Doom		1946
8	The House of the Bears		1946
9	Dark Harvest		1947
10	The Wings of Peace		1948
11	The Sons of Satan		1948
12	The Dawn of Darkness		1949
13	The League of Light		1949
14	The Man Who Shook the World		1950
15	The Prophet of Fire		1951
16	The Children of Hate	The Killers of Innocence; The Children of Despair	1952
17	The Touch of Death		1954
18	The Mists of Fear		1955
19	The Flood		1956
20	The Plague of Silence		1958
21	Dry Spell	The Drought	1959
22	The Terror		1962
23	The Depths		1963
24	The Sleep		1964
25	The Inferno		1965
26	The Famine		1967
27	The Blight		1968
28	The Oasis		1970
29	The Smog		1970
30	The Unbegotten		1971
31	The Insulators		1972
32	The Voiceless Ones		1973
33	The Thunder-Maker		1976
34	The Whirlwind		1979

‘Department Z’ Novels

These Titles can be read as a series, or randomly as standalone novels

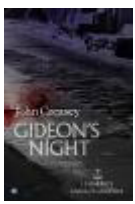
	Title	
1	The Death Miser	1932
2	Redhead	1934
3	First Came a Murder	1934
4	Death Round the Corner	1935
5	The Mark of the Crescent	1935
6	Thunder in Europe	1936
7	The Terror Trap	1936
8	Carriers of Death	1937
9	Days of Danger	1937
10	Death Stands By	1938
11	Menace!	1938
12	Murder Must Wait	1939
13	Panic!	1939
14	Death by Night	1940
15	The Island of Peril	1940
16	Sabotage	1941
17	Go Away Death	1941
18	The Day of Disaster	1942
19	Prepare for Action	1942
20	No Darker Crime	1943
21	Dark Peril	1944
22	The Peril Ahead	1946
23	The League of Dark Men	1947
24	The Department of Death	1949
25	The Enemy Within	1950
26	Dead or Alive	1951
27	A Kind of Prisoner	1954
28	The Black Spiders	1957

Select Synopses



Gideon's Day

Gideon's day is a busy one. He balances family commitments with solving a series of seemingly unrelated crimes from which a plot nonetheless evolves and a mystery is solved. One of the most senior officers within Scotland Yard, George Gideon's crime solving abilities are in the finest traditions of London's world famous police headquarters. His analytical brain and sense of fairness is respected by colleagues and villains alike.

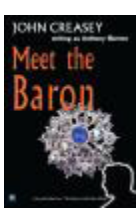


Gideon's Night

On this particular night Commander George Gideon has to deal with a couple of psychopaths who trail pain and blood in their wake. One targets infants, and the other young women on London's foggy streets. There's also an explosive gang war in the offing, and one way or another all of these cases are coming to their breathtaking conclusions at the same time. Can Scotland Yard's finest cope with such a nightmarish scenario, with what would ordinarily be months of time consuming police work crammed into just one night?

Gideon's Fire

Commander George Gideon of Scotland Yard has to deal successively with news of a mass murderer, a depraved maniac, and the deaths of a family in an arson attack on an old building south of the river. This leaves little time for the crisis developing at home . . .



Meet the Baron

John Mannering (*The Baron*) makes his first appearance in this volume. Lord Fauntley cannot help showing off both his daughter and the security under which his precious jewels are kept. Mannering finds himself attracted to both .... Money is tight and so he plans a burglary, but this fails and unexpected consequnces result. The relationship with Lorna Fauntley flourishes, and a series of high profile

thefts and adventures ensure Mannering's future, so he believes, until Lorna equates him with *The Baron*. One of the many further twists in this award winning novel occurs when the police appear to seek Mannering's help, only to have everything turned upside down as the plot develops . . .

Shadow The Baron

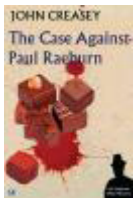
John Mannering ('*The Baron*') is called in by Scorland Yard's Superintendent Bristow to help catch the mysterious jewel thief '*The Shadow*'. No one know the thief's identity, but he has managed to pull off many high profile robberies. However, as Mannering proceeds to track down the target, he finds the pursuer becomes the pursued . . . ..

The House of the Bears

Standing alone in the bleak Yorkshire Moors is Sir Rufus Marne's *'House of the Bears'*. Dr. Palfrey is asked to journey there to examine an invalid - whom he finds has disappeared. Moreover, Marne's daughter lies terribly injured after a fall from the minstrel's gallery, which Dr. Palfrey discovers was no accident. He sets out to look into both matters, but the discoveries he makes are truly fantastic. A deserted mine, powerful explosive and a submarine all feature in this powerful mystery. The results are even capable of surprising him ...

Inspector West Takes Charge

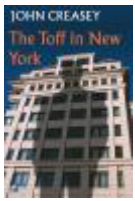
Extortion is the name of the game, as one victim after another is ruthlessly targeted. Chief Inspector Roger West must now solve the problem, along with a tangle of murders - but the case becomes more frightening as every minute passes.



The Case Against Paul Raeburn

Chief Inspector Roger West has been watching and waiting for over two years - he is determined to catch Paul Raeburn out. The millionaire racketeer may have made a mistake, following the killing of a small time crook. Can the ace detective triumph over the evil Raeburn in what are very difficult circumstances? This cannot be assumed as not eveything, it would seem, is as simple as it first appears .....

Introducing The Toff



The Toff is the Hon. Richard Rollison; the ultimate sleuth who revels in solving crimes. Whilst returning home across the Essex countryside from a day's cricket at his father's Norfolk home, he happens upon an accident that sets him on a new trail. This involves murder, suspense and thrilling action as The Toff applies his mind with its usual precision and thoroughness.

The Toff in New York

'Say, Miss Hall, I hope that brother of yours hasn't run into any trouble.' But Will Hall had been kidnapped and the Honourable Richard Rollison, known by many by the apt if absurd soubriquet of the *'Toff'* is soon on the scene, but not before a murdered man had fallen into Valerie Hallís arms. There's lots of action in 'millionaire surroundings', with a rich private eye and the NYPD all on the case, whilst the Toff tracks Dutch Himmy, surely the worst man in New York . . . ..

HOUSE OF STRATUS

www.houseofstratus.com